

DETERIORATION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: MILLENNIAL BEHAVIOR IN CONTEMPORARY
POLITICS

by
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Abstract

Millennials are no strangers to criticisms within the political realm. As the United States' largest generation of voters, the focus is on Millennials and how they will engage in politics. Narcissistic, selfish, entitled – all around “slacktivists” of the voter population, Millennials are notably criticized, despite efforts of engagement. This research explores the civic identity and behaviors of Millennials engaging in politics. Multiple sources of assessments, surveys, and studies were examined to identify the intent and motivations of Millennials in 21st century politics. The results indicate that despite the gap in civic literacy and Millennial skepticism, they understand the importance of engaging in politics and turning out to vote. Millennials are also turning to methods of engagement conducive to their lifestyle. Millennials are challenging the status quo of political engagement to better reflect voters in a digitalized society. Efforts should be made to address the gap in civic literacy and alleviate skepticism in voters. While online engagement does not generate substantial change, it is a measurable resource used by Millennials slacktivists and activists alike.

Keywords: Millennials, political engagement, vote, slacktivist, civic education, distrust

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Overview

The concept of political engagement is on the cusp of change. The very foundation from which political engagement stems is not what it once was – whether it was six years ago, two decades ago, or even in the 1960s. Each generational birth cohort faces different challenges in the political realm and must learn to navigate these in adulthood. While the definition of “political engagement” has seen little variation over time, the methods by which citizens engage has.

There are many opportunities for political engagement. To stay politically engaged between elections citizens can participate by means of:

- Attending public hearings
- Serving on juries
- Engaging in public dialogue
- Meeting with public officials, attending townhalls
- Joining protests and marches

In some cases, committing civil disobedience qualifies as a means of civic engagement as well. These are only a few of the many routes citizens can take to be engaged citizens, and as the structure of society changes, so too does the means of engagement. The focus of this thesis, however, is on Millennial voter behavior in the

2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, as well as future elections. Out of all the generations who participate in politics, Millennials have the potential to become the most influential. Millennials are identified as any individual born between 1981-1997. However, as there are discrepancies in the suggested birth range for the Millennial cohort, all data referencing Millennials, or youth, born before 2000 and after 1980 will be used.

Millennials now number over 75.4 million and represent more than one-quarter of the nation's population.¹ In 2017 the Millennial population pushed past that of the Baby Boomers, becoming the "largest living population" in the United States.² It is no longer a question of whether Millennials are important to the electorate. Their numbers alone show their potential to facilitate change inside and out of the political arena. But to utilize this potential a goal must be made to find the best strategy to engage and motivate Millennials to turnout. Rather, Millennials, regardless of their respective leanings, embody a group of citizens essential to the U.S. They are not only highly influential to the direction of the United States but possess an affinity to technology that is incomparable to that of other generations. Recognizing this is an important step in our work to improve the deterioration of civic engagement in the U.S.

The interest in voting is a direct reflection of the growing concern for where the United States is heading and how Millennials will use this means of engagement to

¹ Fry, Richard. "This May be the Last Presidential Election Dominated by Boomers and Prior Generations," *Pew Research Center*, August 29 2016.

² Ibid.

create change. Voting has remained a consistent method of engagement across all generations. Even Millennials, despite their motivations to engage in politics, continue to view voting as an important duty of U.S. citizens and a crucial component in influencing change. But voter turnout is on the decline.

Year after year the United States has continued to under-perform in voter turnout rates, specifically when looking at turnout for the presidential elections. Since 1964 there have been gradual fluctuations in voter turnout, with only noticeable increases in 1992, 2004, and for the 2016 election year.³ These peaks in turnout rates have happened on or around specific socio-economic events. In 1992 the U.S. had recently ended the Gulf War and were coming out of the 1991 recession. In 2004 voter turnout rates peaked again, coincidentally at the time of President Bush's post-911 re-election. In 2016 turnout rates increased by 1.6 percent but paled in comparison to the 88.5 percent turnout rate of 2004.⁴ These fluctuations in turnout can be argued as a common occurrence in voluntary voting of the democratic process.

The 2016 presidential election cycle witnessed 50 percent turnout among Millennials born between 1981 and 1997, up 1 percent since the election in 2012.⁵ Compared to the voter eligible population by generation, Millennial turnout is substantially lower. So, what is it about Millennials that explains their lackluster performance at the ballot box? The decline itself is not solely the fault of Millennials, as

³ Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. "Voter Turnout." International IDEA, last modified 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hendrickson, Clara, and William Galston. "How Millennials Voted This Election." *Brookings Institution*, November 22, 2016.

critics may suggest. Voting trends are witnessing stagnation across all generations. In 2016 Generation X (born between 1965 - 1980), the parent generation of Millennials, experienced a 63 percent turnout rate, while the Baby Boomers (1946 - 1964) have plateaued over the past four election years, turning out at 69 percent.⁶ Trends in data suggest that at given points the youngest voting-eligible generation maintains the lowest level of turnout. With age, voter turnout rates increase as each generation steps deeper into civic life. This is not an uncommon trend, rather it reflects the very nature of U.S. citizens and their emergence into civic life.

In the 21st century it is the Millennial generation who poses the biggest concern for political engagement. As the largest voter eligible population in the United States, there is concern Millennials do not identify with the traditional duties of being a U.S. citizen. These duties include being concerned about the general health and direction of the country and turning out to vote. There are concerns that as democratic participation declines, the youngest and most influential birth cohort will choose to stand on the sidelines. The power to influence is now precariously in the hands of Millennials. Narcissistic, selfish, and lazy, Millennials are thought to spend more time in front of a screen than in peer-to-peer interaction, but is this surprising? This is the Digital Age where technology is vast, and information is instantaneous. Most communication occurs via some form of technological device. Today's democratic society has the pleasure of hosting a generation raised alongside technology. While technology continues to rapidly

⁶ Michael Winierip, "Boomers, Millennials and the Ballot Box," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2012.
Fry, Richard. "Millennials overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation," *Pew Research Center*.

change, Millennials are right there to witness it. In fact, this generation is the largest intended focus “market” to purchase innovative technology, using it in all aspects of their lives - at home, school, the workplace, and for entertainment.

Millennials have the means to create change, and many have the passion to do so, but the question is – what are they doing? Is 21st century politics limiting or supporting efforts in engagement? Are Millennials as lazy and apathetic in politics as they are perceived to be? Is political participation, specifically voter turnout, declining because Millennials do not recognize its importance as a civic duty or as a means of fostering change? In a globalized society has the importance of democratic participation slipped through this generation’s grasp? Or, is the future of political engagement on the cusp of change – for better, or for worse? This research endeavor aims to focus on these concerns, identifying the intent and motivation of a generation that has received more backlash for what they didn’t do, than credit for what they are doing. Considering this, the aim of this research is to look beyond these criticisms, seeking to identify the Millennial generation’s unfulfilled needs and expectations. This cohort, like those that have come before, will one day lead our society in the realm of politics.

The theories surrounding political engagement blanket multiple generations and are not exclusive to one alone. Recent research has provided a strong argument as to why political engagement tends to be consistently low for the younger generations over time. The dominant narrative highlights the Millennial generation’s negative characteristics and attitudes. Yet more recently the narrative has begun to shift. Political apathy and alienation are used interchangeably to discuss the decline in political

engagement, and most importantly, voter turnout. Theories diverge on the reason why political engagement in Millennials is low. Even with isolating the theories and theoretical frameworks, research is unable to address the question of why Millennials choose to engage in politics. By integrating various theories on this subject, our current understanding of Millennial engagement in politics can increase.

Political scientists seek to discover an identifiable reason as to why political engagement remains bleak, particularly in voter turnout. Low political engagement is an occurrence that happens in most, if not all, birth cohorts. Yet much of the criticism for low voter turnout rests on the shoulders of Millennials, who largely became voter eligible in 2016. It is important to recognize that low turnout of Millennials is not the anomaly it is suggested to be, rather it is typical behavior of newly eligible voters. Historical trends suggest emergence into adulthood, deepens the tie to civic life, resulting in increased involvement in politics and voter turnout.⁷ Simply put, adults are more invested in politics than their younger counterparts. However, as Millennials are now the largest voting bloc in the United States, there is reason to be concerned whether they will engage in politics like older voters. Will this be a continuous trend over the next few presidential elections, or will the U.S. see an increase in turnout, as some analysts suggest?

Data examining Millennials is not difficult to find, rather, specific research on the intent and motivation to engage in politics. Many projects have been undertaken to

⁷ Barr, Kathleen and Tom Edmonds. "Is This Really the Year of the Youth Vote?," *Politics (Campaigns & Elections)*, October 2008, 22-27.

understand Millennials, but only a few offers relevant information to support this research. The most influential voices of Millennial studies emerge from three main sources: The Harvard Institute of Politics, The Pew Research Center, and The Millennial Impact Report. Specifically, The Millennial Impact Report, or MIR, is an organization whose purpose is to consistently capture and comprehend the Millennial generation's cause engagement through reports. Although research is not limited to the sources mentioned above, it is important to recognize the large amount of work these researchers have contributed to the field.

The three chapters that compose this thesis are purely an exploratory attempt at discussing the direction of Millennial voter turnout in the 21st century. With Millennials leading society, it is important to provide a measurable contribution to the growing field of research. The purpose of this thesis is to gain knowledge about the changing dynamics of political engagement, and how Millennials' motivations and intentions are influencing these changes. It is widely recognized that Millennials are changing politics, but it is important to know how variables are influencing decisions as well. To better understand the motivations behind Millennials decisions in politics, each chapter confronts three contemporary issues of political concern. While these issues are not all-inclusive, they are unmistakably influential in the development of Millennials' civic identity and behaviors. As the research shows, each specified issue is subjective, and once properly examined, begins to lay the foundation of a new type of politics. A type of politics that reflects the Digital Age and our globalized society.

Factors speculated to drag down voter turnout rates include alienation, voter apathy, and the voting system and its regulations. However, there is reason to believe these are not the only factors to be concerned of. If conventional wisdom maintains that political engagement and voter turnout will increase in adulthood, is that enough reason to ignore the transitional period in between? If a sense of civic duty is not instilled within the democratic citizen prior to adulthood, will that harm voter intentions later in adulthood? It is also necessary to consider the available resources in the Digital Age. If offline engagement and voter turnout is declining, are other methods of engagement, specifically online, witnessing an increase? These are a few issues to consider when looking at Millennial engagement in the 21st century.

This first chapter tells the story of Millennials and their understanding of civics. Civic education, which is believed to provide the resources citizens need to be civically engaged, is lacking. In response to this issue, the first chapter compares the current state of civic education and voter turnout for United States citizens. Civic education is the foundation from which Millennials build their understanding of politics and civic duty, but trends show civic education has declined over time, and only recently has begun to level out.⁸ This decline is alarming as trends suggest aging youth are more inclined to engage in politics. A gap in civic literacy is impacting voting – a commonly perceived civic duty. For prior generations civic education has always been a crucial resource in setting the standard for civic responsibility and duty of a United States

⁸ Asia Society. "Civics Education is the Foundation for Global Citizenship." *Asia Society*, 2017.

citizen. However, at some point building this foundation for civic engagement has become unstable. High school is a crucial time to teach U.S. citizens about their duty to the country and the responsibilities that go along with it.

To analyze this issue, the first chapter studies reports and assessments on the civic knowledge of high school students. Therefore, the effort of this chapter is to better understand how civic education, or a lack thereof, is affecting civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic participation in youth. It is understood that these three mutually reinforcing elements affect participation (such as voting) among the voter eligible population. Voting is recognized as a duty but also an instrument for change in the political world. Citizens recognize the value of civic engagement and its influence on a democratic society. However, with the gap in civic literacy and a sense of civic duty equally bleak, voter turnout begins to feel the effects.

As the youngest voter eligible cohort, Millennials understanding little of the political system and their role as a democratic citizen. The role of a democratic citizen does not become palpable until they step further into adulthood. So, what is there to do? The answer is clear: provide young adults with a standard of civic education that will lay the groundwork for civic responsibility and how to navigate our democratic system. These efforts may, in turn, remedy Millennial voter apathy and increase voter turnout in generations after. But educating our youth in politics does not come without concerns. An increase in civic education is known to increase skepticism regarding our government. This skepticism influences voter habits in a way that previous generations have not witnessed.

Unlike the first chapter, which focuses on civic literacy, the second chapter details skepticism of the educated youth. What begins as a casual exploration on the role of apathy and alienation in Millennial engagement, quickly leads to an interpretation of what the underlying problem may entail. Trust appears to have more of an influence in the prevalence of apathy and alienation than one would otherwise speculate. Alienation and apathy do not have many similarities. Alienation is regarded as a feeling, and apathy is an attitude. Combined, both terms help to support the understanding of Millennials in politics. Common criticisms of Millennials not only reference an innate selfishness, but their growing apathy in politics. Regarding both apathy and alienation, there may be some truth to this. Some Millennials identify as being apathetic toward politics, while others may acknowledge a level of alienation occurring within the political realm. This chapter offers support for both ideas – suggesting it may be cyclical as an underlying sense of distrust perpetuates both apathetic attitudes and feelings of alienation.

The third and final chapter focuses on how engagement is changing – including preferences of engagement and realistic expectations in the Digital Age. Rather than be turned off by politics, Millennials are finding other means of participating. Conventional methods such as voting, contacting a representative, and knocking on doors, is not preferred or efficient. Millennials recognize this, instead opting to use tools readily available to them. It just so happens the most effective and efficient tool in the Millennial repertoire is the internet and social networking sites.

Similar to the act of pressing ‘Like’ or sharing a political post on Facebook, Millennials are continually pressing to redefine what political engagement means in the Digital Age. Commonly thought as a vain effort of activism, content sharing platforms produce little measurable change. Critics offer that only efforts by Millennial are merely “feel good” techniques, with little need for further examination.⁹ There is fodder to this observation, but it remains weak, at best. Millennials turn out to vote and engaging online does not mean they lack the motivation or intent to engage offline.

A divide is apparent with social networking sites (SNS) and its users. Some Millennials engage online while others do not, but those who choose to be politically active online may do so with varying degrees of motivation. Considering this, it is not surprising to find those who engage online may also have their engagement spill over into offline forms of activism.¹⁰ This spillage, or overflow of engagement, from offline to online is a crucial point in identifying how political engagement may be shifting. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the role of Millennial “slacktivism” – defined as “feel good” activism through efforts of clicking, sharing, or ‘liking’ a social issue or political post online.¹¹

The Digital Age solves many problems that arise in a civilized society – creating significant efficiencies, while providing opportunities for engagement that would otherwise be impossible. The stage is set for the world to witness a new standard of

⁹ Morozov, Evgeny. "Foreign Policy: Brave New World of Slacktivism." *Opinion: Foreign Policy*. May 19, 2009.

¹⁰ Harvard University Institute of Politics. "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service." *Harvard IOP Survey*, October 2016.

¹¹ Morozov, Evgeny. "Foreign Policy: Brave New World of Slacktivism."

engagement. The Digital Age is changing how we communicate – the speed, format, and delivery of information. Social networking sites (SNS) and content sharing platforms perpetuate these changes. This increase in communication efficiency has unquestionably wedged itself into the domain of politics.

What exactly does this mean for politics? It means that unless online activism is universally recognized as another tool of political engagement, trends will not accurately be portrayed. Instead, online political actions taken by Millennials will continue to be disregarded, while traditional forms of engagement (e.g., voting, petition signing, contacting a representative, and volunteering) continue to see a decline.¹² Online and offline forms of engagement are equally important, especially as we regard our position in the Digital Age. Increased technology and efficient forms of communication and content sharing will not boost levels of political engagement. Rather, these opportunities are being missed by the restricted definition of forms of activism. However, if society were to redefine the traditional labels of engagement, therefore include online efforts, activists will be easier to identify – both online and off.

All generations have unique experiences that influence behaviors, motivations, and ideology. The Millennial generation is no different. What is arguably different is the method and measure of engagement for each generation. In a world built around a strong foundation of politics the question to be raised is what garners Millennial

¹² Syvertsen, Amy K., Laura Wray-Lake, Constance A. Flanagan, D. Wayne Osgood, and Laine Briddell. "Thirty-Year Trends in U.S. Adolescents Civic Engagement: A Story of Changing Participation and Educational Differences." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21, no. 3 (2011): 586-94.

attention and keeps them engaged - what interests and concerns them. Has growing up in the age of information, where technology is vast, and information is quick, changed the way Millennials engage in politics? Does being a direct witness to domestic terrorism, climate change, and the Great Recession affect the ways in which Millennials think, the issues that are important to them and their entire outlook on life?¹³

Millennials face an even higher level of societal and parental pressure to succeed, both academically and professionally, that previous generations have not experienced.¹⁴

According to Morris these differing circumstances impact their “political attitudes...as they mature and take power,” shaping their entire outlook on their own future and the nation’s well-being.¹⁵ Considering this, is it such a surprise that Millennials are socialized with different values and hold varying levels of civic responsibility? It is this difference that Millennials face criticism for - but it is the preferences they establish now that will influence tomorrow.

Even now, Millennials shoulder much of the blame for 21st century problems, especially that of low voter turnout rates.¹⁶ Some identify Millennial outlook as the root

¹³ Gilman, Hollie, and Elizabeth Stokes. “The Civic and Political Participation of Millennials.” *Millennials Rising* (2014): 57-60.

Twenge, Jean., Elise Freeman, and W. Keith Campbell. “Generational differences in young adults' life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation, 1966-2009,” *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 102, no. 5 (March 5, 2012): 1045-1062.

¹⁴ Sandfort, Melissa H., and Jennifer G. Haworth. “Whassup? A Glimpse into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation,” *Journal of College and Character* 3, no. 3 (April 01, 2002).

¹⁵ Dick Morris, “The Generation Gap is Back,” *Politics (Campaigns & Elections)*, 29, no. 4 (April 2008): 52.

¹⁶ Blake, Aaron. “More Young People Voted for Bernie Sanders than Trump and Clinton Combined - by a Lot.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company. June 20, 2016.

Josuweit, Andrew. “5 Industries Millennials Are 'Killing' (And Why).” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine. October 24, 2017.

Khalid, Asma, and Joel Rose. “Millennials Just Didn't Love Hillary Clinton The Way They Loved Barack Obama.” *NPR*. November 14, 2016.

of low turnout, while others emphasize changing political concerns. Yet not only are preferred methods of political engagement shifting, but civic education is declining, and voters face obstacles concerning elections and voting. However, relief can be seen with these obstacles - for it is far easier to reform such factors than it is to change the personality and outlook of an entire generation!

So have these circumstances fostered a generation who has rightfully earned criticism for being narcissistic, lazy, and self-entitled? Or are Millennials more aware of their surroundings - of real world issues? Their tolerance of religion, open-minded stance on gender issues, and knowledge about the intrinsic nature of the economy – its potential and its hardships, is worth acknowledging. Instead Millennials are frequently greeted with criticism for not turning out. In truth, it may be said the Millennial generation perceives and acknowledges the world through a lens that is otherwise foreign to their predecessors.¹⁷ Rather than engaging in similar methods of generations prior, Millennials are unique in their view of civic responsibility and methods of engagement. What was once considered conventional is no longer applicable. While Millennials are immersed in the dynamic political scheme, they concern themselves with social issues stemming beyond personal motives. Millennials are using their skepticism and the Digital Era they are living in to change the status quo of political engagement. A shift is being made to accommodate the needs of younger society members and widely held expectations for political engagement. Civic engagement will continue to

¹⁷ Dick Morris, “The generation gap is back.”

deteriorate if time is not taken to refine political engagement and accurately portray the needs and of a 21st century voter.

The following chapters will each be broken into four main sections: introduction, literature review, results, and discussion. Within each section a discussion is made to better understand the chapter's topic. In the introduction readers will find the research questions and objectives, as well as the theoretical background. It is here the first main section will transition into the literature review. The second section, the literature review, reviews literature relevant in building a discussion on the key relationships in the chapter. At the end of the literature review section, the data source[s] and the methodology of the chapter is provided, leading the way the third section - results. The results are broken down based upon the concepts and relevant findings of the chapter. When multiple data sources are used, a combination of similar concepts and findings are provided. The discussion itself is brief, noting the key findings or relationships, as well as the gaps in the literature. As all the data was not collected from one primary source, this paper synthesizes the results of various sources. By combining these sources, an exploratory attempt is made to create interest in, or change, the understanding of Millennial voter turnout and engagement in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 1: From “A” to “F”: The Gap in Civic Literacy and Voter Turnout

“If indeed we seek a democratic society in which the public welfare matters as much as the individual’s welfare, and in which global welfare matters along with nation welfare, then education must play its influential part to bring such a society into being.”¹⁸

Introduction

In a society where technology is unparalleled, and information is vast, civic education does not fare well against the opportunity of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). STEM introduces students to career opportunities that are pushed in schools across the country. In May of 2016, STEM occupations account for 8.8 million jobs and representing over 6.3 percent in U.S. employment.¹⁹ Prior generations were exposed to their fair share of civics in secondary school, whereas current generations’ exposure pales in comparison.²⁰ With a limited focus on civics in secondary school, Millennials may not have the civic knowledge necessary to transition into civically-responsible adults. Civic education not only provides perspective on a

¹⁸The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. "A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future." 2017.

¹⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "8.8 Million Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Jobs in May 2016." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 06, 2017.

²⁰ Shapiro, Sarah, and Catherine Brown. "The State of Civics Education." Center for American Progress.

person's responsibility to the democratic society but helps form political dispositions that translate into adulthood.²¹

With the decline in civic education, the United States risks educating youth on the importance of the self, while undervaluing the importance of being a civically responsible citizen. Focusing educational standards and policies on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), is important to nurture career and college-ready young adults – however, when the academic standards shift, focus is lost on other important educational pillars. This is a problem that goes beyond education and career goals. A school's mission is to create civic minded and responsible adults.²² Once these standards are no longer being met, schools begin mass-educating young adults who are predominantly career-minded, with little civic duty and patriotism. Instead, we should be campaigning for the three "C's" – college, career, and citizenship, as proposed by *The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement*.²³

Americans are now facing abysmal voter turnout rates and emerging adults who lack a basic understanding of civic knowledge and skills. Without proper education in civics, high school graduates may be facing an issue of civic illiteracy. This in turn leads to limited knowledge of the democratic system, an avoidable distrust in the government, and low turnout at the ballot box. If the need for a stronger presence of

²¹ Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Rep. Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of, 2011. Print.

²²Ibid.

²³ The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. "A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future." 2017.

civics is incomprehensible, then we must be willing to ask ourselves, “what kind of education do we need?” The answer to this lies in a response by a Chilean sociologist, Eugenio Tironi, who offers the response can be found by asking the following question: “What kind of society do we want?” If policy makers, leaders, and educators had the intention of answering this question in a similar manner, then civic literacy would improve – and thus would civic engagement. This will lead to a more holistically educated citizen, who is not only ready for higher education, but their career, and role as a democratic citizen.

Research Question and Objectives

More recently there has been a nod toward the importance of civic education, making way for newer policies and state requirements to focus on and assess civic knowledge in high school. However, identifying the importance of civic education is not enough to push for the implementation of new civic education standards in secondary school. As of right now only a handful of states are working toward increasing the prioritization of civic curricula. However, for a substantial change to be seen in civic duty and general voter turnout, especially for future generations, a nation-wide agenda must be set.²⁴ With this research, identifying the influence of civic education supports the rationale for strengthening civic-centered curricula. The objective of this would then be

²⁴ McAvoy, Paula, Rebecca Fine, and Ann Herrera Ward. "State Standards Scratch the Surface of Learning about Political Parties and Ideology." *CIRCLE*. Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. 2016.

to acknowledge the influence of civics and restore its importance as a pillar in educational standards.

This chapter will attempt to identify any relationship between civic education standards and voting behavior. Are the current means for educating youth lacking in ways, which are influencing voter behavior in adulthood? By acknowledging the importance of civic literacy and civic responsibility, this chapter can look directly at how civic knowledge and skills, recorded by assessments, public opinion polls and surveys, translates into voting behavior. The second objective of this paper is to identify the gaps in literature and public records, which made other efforts of research difficult.

Theoretical Background

Civic education is concerned with three mutually reinforcing elements: civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic participation. As was best articulated in *Guardian of Democracy*, the contributors offered that “having knowledge and skills facilitates participation, and participation can be a valuable way of acquiring knowledge and skills.”²⁵ This mutually reinforcing relationship suggests that with limited civic knowledge or skills, the elements of dispositions, and therefore participation, can be affected. Strengthening this sentiment, Judith Torney-Purta suggests civic education has

²⁵ Annenberg Public Policy Center. “2015 Constitution Day/Civics Study.” Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2015. August 31, 2015: 18.

a proven track record of strengthening both political knowledge and participation.²⁶ It is with this understanding the research moves forward.

Civic Knowledge

Researchers from the report *Guardian of Democracy* broke down the term “civic knowledge” stating that it is a “fundamental understanding of the structure of government and the processes by which government passes laws and makes policy.”²⁷ This knowledge is normally derived from the time spent within the education system, preparing adolescents to be civically knowledgeable in adulthood. The report highlights this importance by offering that “democratic citizenship is all but impossible if citizens fail to understand basic concepts such as separation of powers, federalism, individual rights, and the role of government.”²⁸ As a member of a democratic society, a citizen should at least have a vague understanding of how to be democratic participants, and how their membership influences the society.

Numerous sources have supported this sentiment, as responses from surveys and assessments suggest just how little basic concepts are understood. According to the authors of the Civics Education Initiative, “research shows that a lack of civic knowledge contributes to increases in social polarization, ideological sorting, and distrust or hostility toward opposing views.”²⁹

²⁶Torney-Purta, Judith. "Patterns in the Civic Knowledge, Engagement, and Attitudes of European Adolescents: The IEA Civic Education Study." *European Journal of Education* 37, no. N (2002): 129-41.

²⁷ Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*: 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Railey, Hunter, and Jan Brennan. "The Civics Education Initiative 2015-2016." *Education Commission of the States*, September 2016.

Civic Skills

To participate as an active, engaged and responsible citizen requires a certain amount of civic skills to navigate the democratic society. Engaged citizens are the force behind a fully functioning democratic society. It is said that there is a strong correlation between civic skills and actual participation, although it is difficult to measure participatory skills. In one report by Jan Brennan, she offers four civic competencies while discussing civic education – two of which are core elements of civic skills:

- Civic intellectual skills - involve critical thinking, media literacy and the ability to connect democratic concepts to real-world civic issues.
- Civic participatory skills – include respectful dialogue among multiple perspectives, public communication, understanding electoral and non-electoral processes and taking informed action. ³⁰

It is with the participatory skills that many citizens develop a better understanding of how, as a voter, they can take action and “plan strategically for civic change.” ³¹

Civic Dispositions

Civic disposition is best articulated as a simplified version of the Guardian of Democracy’s definition. In an article published in *The Process of Education Reform*, the authors simplified the definition of civic dispositions, writing “the characteristics and

³⁰ Jan Brennan. “ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for Civic Education.” *Education Commission of the States*, April 2017: 5.

³¹ Railey, Hunter, and Jan Brennan. “The Civics Education Initiative 2015-2016.” *Education Commission of the States*, September 2016.

outlooks supportive of responsible political engagement and active civic participation.”³²

Jan Brennan builds off of this definition by describing civic disposition as a core competency that involves “tolerance and respect, concern for the common good, personal efficacy and a commitment to community civic engagement.”³³ It is through civic disposition that participation is related.

Literature Review

Prioritizing Where It Counts

Variables explaining voter turnout are not mutually exclusive. In a democratic society, low voter turnout is a problem, but no single issue can be used as an explanation. Many variables influence voter turnout. This chapter looks at civic literacy because it is the foundation for civic engagement. While many variables influence voter behavior, it is civic literacy that provides the necessary means to understand, and therefore navigate, civics in adulthood.

Navigating civic life, being a responsible Democratic citizen, is not always simple. Many other contributing factors influence voter turnout. There are generational differences that surface over time, and that is no different for Millennials. While Millennials face issues with civic literacy, this was not a concern for prior generations. Instead, while civic education was still prominent, the Baby Boomers and Generation X were exposed to strong social movements, including the Women’s movement, gay

³² Baumann, Paul, and Molly Ryan. "New Civics: Civic Learning is Not Flat Learning." Education Commission of the States. *The Process of Education Reform* 14, no. 2 (April 2013).

³³ Jan Brennan. "ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for Civic Education." 5.

right's movement, civil movement, and environmental movement. These social movements were a driving force behind educating the youth on the importance of democratic participation.

Civic literacy is not the same as it once was. The generational difference in voter turnout lies in three factors: the socio-political environment, technological innovations, and civic literacy. As social movements transition into online versions of their past selves, the difference in their influence does not intersect. Millennials are not immersed in the same socio-political environment Generation X and the Baby Boomers were exposed to. With this comes the influence of technology on the voter and their behaviors. Technology is changing the way voters engage in politics.³⁴ However, unlike the socio-political environment or civic literacy, technology is a method of engagement not a reason to be engaged. Overall, political engagement is vastly different between generations. While other factors may influence generational differences in turnout, civic education is the one factor that builds a foundation for civic engagement.³⁵

The Importance of Civics

To further augment the importance of civics, Civic Missions of Schools discussed Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling on American attitudes on education.³⁶ Over the course of 33 years, the polling consistently and overwhelmingly showed the opinion Americans

³⁴ Armstrong, Paul. "How Technology is Really Going to Change Politics in the Next 20 Years." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, March 2, 2018.

Entwistle, Scott. "How Social Media and Technology Have Changed the Election Process." Techerator. October 23, 2012. Voting Information Project.

³⁵ Asia Society. "Civics Education is the Foundation for Global Citizenship." *Asia Society*, 2017.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

have on civic education. According to the poll Americans “overwhelmingly concurred with the statement that “educating young people for responsible citizenship” should be the primary goal of our schools.”³⁷ Whether civic education is at the forefront of educational standards, or it is bogged down by other obligatory coursework – its importance to U.S. citizens is hard to deny. Former Associate Justice, Sandra Day O’Connor, emphasized the importance of good civics for our youth stating:

The better educated our citizens are, the better equipped they will be to preserve the system of government we have. And we have to start with the education of our nation’s young people. Knowledge about our government is not handed down through the gene pool. Every generation has to learn it, and we have some work to do.

This quote suggests a very important point: to be civically literate is to gain knowledge through learning, as it is not an inherent skill.

Margaret Stimmann Branson is also heard advocating for good civic education by stressing one important and common trait of U.S. citizens: “In a self-governing society citizens are decision-makers.”³⁸ It is widely acknowledged to be the citizens’ responsibility in recognizing and assessing issues which plague their society. Meanwhile it is also the citizens’ responsibility to make judgements that benefit society moving forward. And this is not an easy feat when the citizens lack the intricate knowledge of

³⁷ Civic Mission of Schools. "America’s Civic Learning Crisis: Preparation for Informed and Engaged Citizenship is the Co-Equal Goal of Education: A Fact Sheet.," Civic Learning Fact Sheet, 2017.

³⁸ Stimmann Branson, Margaret. "The Role of Civic Education," Center for Civic Education, September 1998.

the American government. Supporting her argument, Branson suggests participatory skills must be acquired and developed, which can be categorized as “interacting, monitoring, and influencing.”³⁹ Each one of these participatory skills develop over time, and are largely influenced in the academic environment. With an academic environment that lacks focus on civic education, problems arise in developing these participatory skills. The Guardian of Democracy Report further supports Branson’s argument, suggesting that “...Civic learning promotes civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.”⁴⁰ It is this relationship which has been acknowledged as important, but has recently been overlooked by the growing need to produce college and career ready high school graduates.

The Decline of Civic Education

Civic education, broadly defined by various field experts, is education on self-government. ⁴¹ Margaret Stimmann Branson best described this stating, “Democratic self-government means that citizens are actively involved in their own governance, they do not just passively accept the dictums of others or acquiesce to the demands of others.”⁴² It is through civic education that most citizens are able recognize their role in the democratic society and be involved in democratic self-government. Other experts

³⁹ Stimmann Branson, Margaret. "The Role of Civic Education."

⁴⁰ Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Rep. Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of, 2011. Print.

⁴¹ Stimmann Branson, Margaret. "The Role of Civic Education."

⁴² Ibid.

build off this, explaining the importance of civic knowledge as the foundation of democratic citizenship. Specifically, they offer that “democratic citizenship is all but impossible if citizens fail to understand basic concepts such as separation of powers, federalism, individual rights, and the role of government.”⁴³

However, even with acknowledging the importance of civic education, civic knowledge levels remain static - with trends suggesting it is on the decline. Until the late 1960s effort was made to educate youth on these basic concepts by offering as many as three courses on civics, democracy, and government. According to the Civic Missions of Schools, these three courses covered a range of information including: ⁴⁴

- The traditional “civics” course – which “emphasize[d] the rights and responsibilities of citizens and ways that they could work together and relate to government”
- The “Problems of democracy” course – involving “discussions of public policy issues”
- The “government” course (common in curriculum today) - which “describes and analyzes government in a more distant way, often with little explicit discussion of a citizen’s role.”

Although these three courses were unable to cover every aspect of civics, the mere act of offering these courses kept civic learning at the forefront of educational standards.

⁴³ Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*.

⁴⁴ Carnegie Corporation of New York, and CIRCLE. "Civic Mission of Schools." Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003. 14.

Since then civic education standards have shifted, with 30 percent of states requiring only half a year of civics.⁴⁵ While ten states have no civic course requirements, it is important to note that that does not stop individual states from setting their own course standards. With limited class hours spent discussing, analyzing, and developing skills in civic participation, civic knowledge and responsibility has also experienced a similar decline.

According to the most recent 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, more than two-thirds of all American students scored below proficient in civic knowledge.⁴⁶ Past assessments in 2006 and 1998 reported similar results, revealing a trend that spans across a twelve-year span. This brings into question whether this trend is on the decline, or if it will remain static – right along with Millennial voter turnout. If one cannot easily recognize the importance of their civic duties in a self-governing society, will it inadvertently affect voter behavior?

Educating Youth to Turn Out

Beginning with the premise that civic education during adolescence forms predispositions in adult voting behaviors, this chapter emphasizes the importance of educating youth. Time and again civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions have been associated with the intention of voting. Alison Cohen and Benjamin Chaffee suggest

⁴⁵ Shapiro, Sarah, and Catherine Brown. "The State of Civics Education." Center for American Progress. February 21, 2018.

⁴⁶ Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*.

“increased civic content knowledge, current events knowledge, general self-efficacy, and skill-specific self-efficacy are each independently associated with increased self-reported likelihood of future voting.”⁴⁷ Specifically, the quality and the quantity of civic education young adults are subjected to are most likely to influence voting behaviors in election periods.

This past presidential election cycle witnessed a 1 percent increase in turnout among 18-29-year-old Millennials since the last election in 2012, where turnout hit 49 percent.⁴⁸ Amongst all voter eligible generations, Millennial turnout came in substantially lower. In 2012 the parent generation of Millennials, Generation X, had a 61 percent turnout rate, while the Baby Boomers turned out at 69 percent.⁴⁹

With the increase priority in STEM curricula (science, technology, engineering, and math), civic education sits on the backburner for many educational standards. Federal regulations do not regulate state curricula, instead “states vary considerably in the policy device and manner in which they address civic education in statute, administrative code, and curriculum and standard frameworks.”⁵⁰ Conventional wisdom suggests this new curriculum prioritization harms the voting behaviors of “tomorrow’s voters” – the twelfth graders that are now exposed to less civic curricula than generations prior (see *Figure 1*)⁵¹. Voter turnout, specifically for Millennials, is

⁴⁷ Cohen, Alison K., and Benjamin W. Chaffee. "The Relationship Between Adolescents' Civic Knowledge, Civic Attitude, and Civic Behavior and Their Self-Reported Future Likelihood of Voting." *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 8, no. 1 (2012): 43-57. 2.

⁴⁸ Hendrickson, Clara, and William Galston. "How Millennials Voted This Election."

⁴⁹ Michael Winerip, "Boomers, Millennials and the Ballot Box," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2012.

⁵⁰ Railey, Hunter, and Jan Brennan. "The Civics Education Initiative 2015-2016."

⁵¹ McDonald, Michael. "Voter Turnout Demographics." United States Elections Project, 2016.

uncommonly low even with consideration of other factors such as apathetic attitudes, distrust, and other issues with the voter system.⁵² Voter turnout is known to increase with age and time, but in the 2016 presidential election only Millennials,

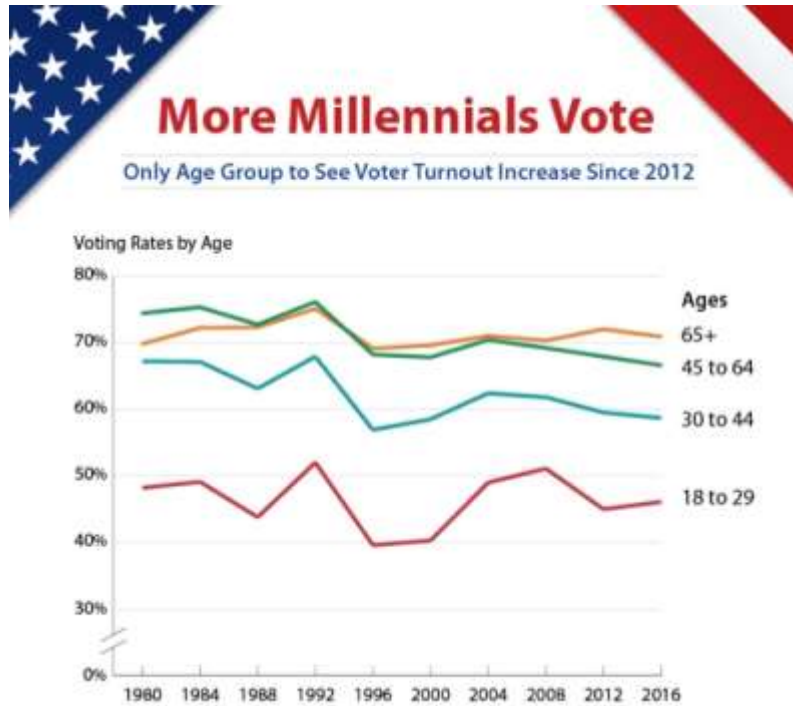


Figure 1: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1978-2014

ages 18-29-years-old, saw an increase in turnout. Looking at *Figure 1* you can see that while Millennials increased in their turnout for this past presidential election, all other age groups witnessed a decline in their turnout in the last election year. While no data was found to explain this, there may be reason to believe a plateau has occurred within the voter population. A question may be made to inquire whether socio-economic factors may motivate an increase in turnout. This brings into question what Millennials

⁵² Damon, William. "Failing Liberty 101." *Educational Leadership* 69, no. 7 (2012): 22-26. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2017).

are being exposed to, or lack of exposure, which may be influencing their voter behaviors.

Although it should be a priority to focus on career-readiness for high school seniors, focusing solely on STEM can weaken civic knowledge and literacy. This in turn becomes an issue when high school graduates are among the largest living population, and therefore voting bloc, in the United States.⁵³ Shifting the focus from civic education to STEM creates a gap between professional skills and civic skills. With attention focused solely on career-readiness, civics takes a hit – in turn, negatively affecting even the most basic knowledge of civics.⁵⁴

Understanding civic education's influence on voter behavior is an important contribution to the current field of research. Once it is understood why civic education requirements have changed, how they are improving, and its influence on dispositions and voting behaviors, it will be easier to identify how it may influence general voter turnout. It is not until this foundation is established can research build upon it. Educators and policymakers are aware of the situation with civics.⁵⁵ The current condition of civic knowledge is concerning, especially as we continue to grow as a globalized society. Discussions are surfacing about how to revive civic literacy in our society, but it is a complex process.

⁵³ Fry, Richard. "This May be the Last Presidential Election Dominated by Boomers and Prior Generations," *Pew Research Center*, August 29 2016.

⁵⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (NCES 2011–466)." Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. 2011.

⁵⁵ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016.

Minding the Gap in the Literature

Visible holes litter the field of civic education and voting habits. Leading experts tend to focus on either civic education or voting habits, and rarely on the potential relationship between the two. With limited research, efforts have been made to combine schools of thoughts and the conventional wisdom to generate a foundation for this research paper. But one common issue remains - instead of two conflicting schools of thought, there is an absence of opposing views and opinions. The information that is available suggests two main points of discourse. One, curricula that improves career-readiness has taken precedence over other subjects – including that of civics. The second forms around a discussion on the decline in civics, and its potential relevance to voter behavior. This particular point of discussion is limited on correlational data but has been discussed by various experts in the field.

The research in this field lacks a strong focus on the dynamic between civic education standards in schools and dispositions in future voter turnout. After the 1960s when the focus in civic education shifted, individual states continue to vary in their academic standards. Since the 1960s high school civic courses have decreased from an average of three to one.⁵⁶ Being that little to no data has surfaced about prior generation's specific exposure to civics, there is difficulty comparing how fluctuations have influenced voting in adulthood. Wherever applicable data has been drawn from

⁵⁶ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016.

surveys, public opinion polls, and assessments to place this chapter's findings into a broader context.

This gap in the literature is important to note as factors involving voter turnout trends remain at the forefront of discussion. Therefore, the contribution of this thesis is twofold: to provide more literature on the subject and to identify the influence of civic education on voter turnout. The contribution of this thesis will provide information on the relationship between civic education and voter turnout and whether the fluctuation in the academic standards is impacting voter trends.

Data Source

Resources pertaining to this subject were limited and provided little evidence to support or reject the claim. By referencing multiple data sources, including surveys, assessments, and public opinion surveys, this chapter lays foundational work instrumental understanding the relationship of civic knowledge and skills with voter behavior, and how civic education may be influencing these variables. For this chapter data is used and evaluated from the 2010 Nation's Report Card, the 2016 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, American Council of Trustees and Alumni Report, the Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, and

the Annenberg Public Policy Center Civics Study.⁵⁷⁵⁸⁵⁹⁶⁰⁶¹ All five reports used various methodologies to support their research questions. Select data from each report has been drawn into this chapter to illustrate the relationship proposed by this chapter.

Methodology

2010 Nation's Report Card

The National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment is designed to collect information on educational experience, often administered as survey questionnaires. Each assessment is assembled and distributed across the nation, either digitally or on paper, to a sample of students who “reflect the student population of the nation as a whole as well as those of individual states and districts.”⁶² The NAEP assessment has an allotted time of 90-120 minutes, with responses pulled from students, teachers, and school administrators. Opening the survey to a larger target

⁵⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (NCES 2011–466)." Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. 2011.

⁵⁸ Schulz, Wolfram, John Ainley, Julian Fraillon, Bruno Losito, and Gabriela Agrusti. "IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 Assessment Framework." Camberwell, Victoria, Australia: The Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016.

⁵⁹ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016.

⁶⁰ CIRCLE. "All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement. The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge." Medford, MA: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013.

⁶¹ Annenberg Public Policy Center. "2015 Constitution Day/Civics Study." Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2015, August 31, 2015.

⁶² National Center for Education Statistics. "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (NCES 2011–466)."

population provides more detailed context for student results. As each assessment contains both multiple-choice and constructed-response questions, each response undergoes a thorough review process before the results are released.⁶³

In this specific assessment year, the 2010 Nation's Report Card focused on civics at grades 4, 8, and 12. As it is a national assessment of educational progress, the report informs the public and the educators of the academic achievement and progress of the targeted students at each grade. During this specific year, the researchers used national representative samples of 7,100 fourth-graders, 9,600 eighth-graders, and 9,900 twelfth-graders. The results of this assessment were then compared to the 1998 and 2006 assessments. As this is solely an evaluative assessment, no hypotheses or research design was available.

2016 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study

The 2016 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) investigates the changing trends in civic and citizenship education and examines the ways in which young people are prepared to take on their role as an active and engaged citizen.⁶⁴ To best measure changes over time, the results of this study were compared to a previous study from 2009. Cognitive test materials and a student questionnaire were administered with the goal of optimal evaluation. Contextual data was collected through

⁶³ National Center for Education Statistics. "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (NCES 2011–466)."

⁶⁴ Schulz, Wolfram, John Ainley, Julian Fraillon, Bruno Losito, and Gabriela Agrusti. "IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 Assessment Framework."

student, teacher, and school questionnaires, as well as national contests survey. To measure a diverse range of cognitive aspects, the ICCS 2016 study included item types such as multiple-choice and open-ended responses. Designed for international research, there are over 38 participating countries with data gathered from more than 140,000 eighth-grade students and 62,000 other students in over 5,300 schools.⁶⁵

Concerned with “students’ civic knowledge, their disposition to engage, and their attitudes related to civic and citizenship issues,” each of the five research questions related to a subset of specific research questions (RQ). The five research questions are listed in detail below:

RQ 1 How is civic and citizenship education implemented in participating countries?

RQ 2 What is the extent and variation of students’ civic knowledge within and across participating countries?

RQ 3 What is the extent of students’ engagement in different spheres of society and which factors within or across countries are related to it?

RQ 4 What beliefs do students in participating countries hold regarding important civic issues in modern society and what are the factors influencing their variation?

⁶⁵ Schulz, Wolfram, John Ainley, Julian Fraillon, Bruno Losito, and Gabriela Agrusti. “IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 Assessment Framework.” 5.

RQ 5 How are schools in the participating countries organized with regard to civic and citizenship education and what is its associate with students? ⁶⁶

As this specific study focuses on an international assessment to answer these research questions, only data that relates to this chapter will be used.

ACTA: A Crisis in Civic Education

Reported by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), this 2016 report assessed over 1,100 liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States. Drawn from 55 top-ranked colleges and universities, ACTA tested a diverse range of seniors on their basic historical knowledge.⁶⁷ This report did not provide detailed data from their findings, but the researchers provided a detailed discussion on their findings.

Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge: All Together Now

Commissioned by members who are considered the most distinguished scholarly experts on youth engagement, this study pulled data from two separate studies, which will be described in detail below.⁶⁸ The first study was funded by the Youth Education Fund and was spearheaded by CIRCLE. This survey was administered online, in both English and Spanish, polling at two separate times to a random sample of households. One polling was of 1,695 nationally representative youth (ages 18-29) between June and

⁶⁶ Schulz, Wolfram, John Ainley, Julian Fraillon, Bruno Losito, and Gabriela Agrusti. "IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 Assessment Framework." 7-8.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

July of 2012. In the same year between October 12 and 23, a second polling was done drawing 1,109 of the same youth.⁶⁹ By surveying the same population over a certain period, any changes in trends are acknowledged and recorded.

The National Youth Survey was the second study discussed in this report. This time CIRCLE commissioned Universal Survey Inc. to recruit 4,483 individuals to “participate in a 17-minute random-digit-dialing phone interview.”⁷⁰ This study was intentionally designed to poll two-thirds of its population from cellphone numbers, with the rest being drawn from land-line. Interviews began the day after the 2012 presidential election and continued for six weeks after that. All respondents answered a core set of 45 questions, with an additional 45 questions split between three parallel forms, allowing each form to contain two out of three “blocks” of questions. This methodology resulted in an additional 30 questions - totaling approximately 75 questions per individual. On average, there were 2,900 respondents per question, resulting in a wide array of questions to use in the study.⁷¹

Annenberg Public Policy Center Civics Study

Conducted for the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, results from the national survey were released detailing how Americans answered basic questions about their government.⁷² 1,012 English and Spanish respondents were interviewed over the phone – 503 landline interviews and 509 cell

⁶⁹ CIRCLE. “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement. The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge.”

⁷⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

⁷² Ibid.

phone interviews. Conducted between August 27-31, 2015, the final results were released on Constitution Day (September 17th) along with the launch of the Civics Renewal Network.

Results

This is a presentation of findings drawn from various reports and assessments where notable trends have been established. Points of interest focus on the influence of civic education on voter behavior and turnout but will discuss any findings directly or indirectly related to the research question.

The Gap in Civic Literacy

Recent results from civic assessments have done little to persuade researchers that civic literacy is improving. Instead, many assessments, including the Nation's Report Card, show twelve-graders performing at a lower rate - the average civics score has been on a decline since its first recorded assessment in 1998. Although the average civics score has only dropped two points since then, it continues to sit at fifty percent.⁷³ Students performance fell into one of three levels: *basic*, *proficient*, or *advanced*. Breaking down these results over time, civics achievement-level results are notably low. According to the *2010 Nation's Report Card*, six out of ten students consistently

⁷³ National Center for Education Statistics. "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (NCES 2011-466)." Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. 2011.

performed at or above the *basic* level in the assessment, and 2010 only one-quarter of graduating high school seniors scored at the proficient or advanced level in civics – coming in less than prior assessments in 2006 or 1998.”⁷⁴ This decline in civic knowledge is gradual, but worth noting. To test for civic literacy, the same report tested 14,000 college seniors in 2006 and 2007. The results of the exam emphasized the emerging trend in civic education with the average score sitting at 50 percent – otherwise known as an “F” in standard grading criteria.⁷⁵

Fake it ‘Til You Make it, or Not

In understanding our free institutions of government, the ACTA drew questions from standard high school civics curricula and surveyed American college graduates. These specific questions emphasize the contents of the U.S. Constitution and the basic intricacies of our government. Results from this survey suggest that college curriculum does little to improve students’ civic literacy.⁷⁶ Instead, college graduates perform at almost the same level as their high school counterparts - doing little to fill the education gap in civics. Notable results from this survey indicated the lack of domestic civic knowledge, but many other figures are important to note as well, and are listed below:

- Only 20.6% of respondents could identify James Madison as the Father of the Constitution. More than 60% thought the answer was Thomas Jefferson –

⁷⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. 34.

⁷⁵ The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. "A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future." 2017. 6.

⁷⁶ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016: 5.

despite the fact that Jefferson, as U.S. ambassador to France, was not present during the Constitutional Convention.

- College graduates performed little better: Only 28.4% named Madison, and 59.2% chose Jefferson.
- We live in a dangerous world – but almost 40% of college graduates didn't know that Congress has the power to declare war
- Less than half of college graduates know that presidential impeachments are tried before the U.S. Senate
- And 9.6% of college graduates marked that Judith Sheindlin- "Judge Judy"- was on the Supreme Court!⁷⁷

Adding to these figures, a large number of students did not know how to amend the Constitution, nor were they familiar with the term length of members of Congress. Knowledge about U.S. history was equally deficient.

To emphasize the difference in age groups and their understanding of the workings of our government, ACTA reported the following: "98.2% of college graduates over the age of 65 knew that the president cannot establish taxes- but only 73.8% of college graduates aged 25-34 answered correctly."⁷⁸ A knowledge gap of 25 percent is only one of the many issues related to the lack of civic knowledge in younger generations. According to the Civics Study by Annenberg Public Policy Center, their sample population of students performed just as poorly on similar subjects. Only 36

⁷⁷American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016: 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

percent of the Civic Study's respondents could name all three branches of the U.S. government, and a third were unable to name one.⁷⁹ Furthermore, only a quarter of Americans were aware it takes a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto.

Learning about Civics Improves Civic Knowledge

Exposure to civic-related topics in high school varies by the geographical location and academic standards. Researchers for the 2010 Nation's Report Card attempted to capture students' exposure to common civic related topics by prompting them to respond with either a "yes," "no," or "I don't know." 50 percent of the students reported studying seven of the nine topics provided. These topics included, "the congress, the president and the cabinet, state and local government, the U.S. Constitution, the court system, how laws are made, and political parties, elections, and voting."⁸⁰

It was with this effort of capturing civic exposure that the Nation's Report Card could better understand its influence on civic knowledge. Their findings suggest that students who reported studying at least one civics or government course in high school

⁷⁹ Annenberg Public Policy Center. "2015 Constitution Day/Civics Study." Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center, August 31, 2015.

⁸⁰ National Center for Education Statistics. 2011.

performed an average of 15 points higher on the civics assessment compared to their peers.⁸¹

The Commitment of Being Engaged

Civic disengagement is not an uncommon occurrence. According to the Harvard IOP Survey, three-quarters of the participants answered “no” when asked if they considered themselves to be politically engaged or politically active.⁸² Specifically, most Millennials don’t consider themselves “activists,” rather most identify as a “supporter” of a cause or social issue.⁸³ Regarding political engagement, researchers continue to stress the importance of civic education. Time and again civic education has predicted the likelihood of a person’s engagement.⁸⁴ It is difficult to dispute that knowledgeable citizens are more likely to recognize the importance of being an active citizen, whether they recognize themselves as activists or supporters.

⁸¹ National Center for Education Statistics. 2011: 39.

⁸² Harvard University Institute of Politics. "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service." *Harvard IOP Survey*, October 2016.

⁸³ Achieve. 2017. *The Power of Voice: A new era of cause activations & social issue adoption. The 2017 Millennial Impact Report*. Report. 36.

⁸⁴ Harvard University Institute of Politics. "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service." 2017.

Voting Trends

2016 showcased an increase in Millennial voter turnout, up one percent compared to the previous presidential election where turnout hit 49 percent. However, this is not a novel statistic as turnout for 18-29-year-old voters has consistently been low compared to the older cohorts.⁸⁵ Even as Millennial turnout incrementally increased, it does little to affect the declining trends of

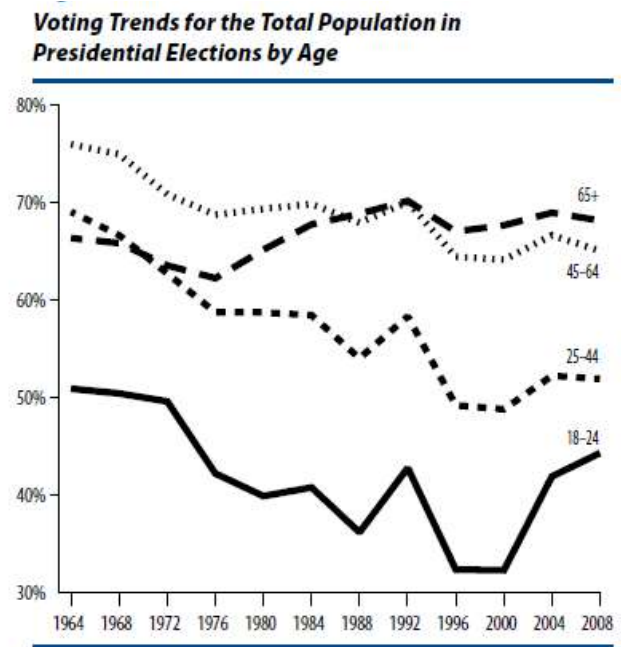


Figure 2: Coley and Sum, 2012.

voter turnout over time. As can be seen in *Figure 2*, voter turnout steadily increases with age, while the youngest age group maintains the lowest level of turnout each election year.⁸⁶

Building off voting trends, the Millennial Impact Report of 2017 highlighted two important findings in voting behavior. First, six out of ten respondents believe voting will lead to change – and this statistic directly correlates to the respondent's educational attainment.⁸⁷ The second finding illustrates that three-quarters, 77 percent, of

⁸⁵ Coley, Richard, and Andrew Sum. "Fault Lines in Our Democracy Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior, and Civic Engagement in the United States." *ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education Research and Development*, April 2012.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁷ Achieve. 2017. *The Power of Voice: A new era of cause activations & social issue adoption. The 2017 Millennial Impact Report*. Report: 21.

respondents agree with the statement: “voting is the duty of every citizen.”⁸⁸ The act of voting is also seen as a “vital form of activism,” but since many young adults do not identify themselves as activists, it is difficult to measure how much of an influence this may have on their turnout.^{89 90}

There’s Always Political Engagement

Voter turnout is low. Civic education could always improve. Educators and policy makers know we have a problem.⁹¹ Higher education has the potential to minimize the civic literacy gap, but civic knowledge assessments show little improvement between high school and college graduation. The United States’ concern is to increase voter turnout and to have actively engaged democratic citizens. But first, efforts must be made to revive the civics in America.

To be civically knowledgeable about one’s country helps nurture a sense of civic duty - or at least create civic dispositions. But one issue remains unavoidable: civic literacy is not a gift from the gene pool – it requires time, energy, and effort from everyone. It is a learned skill, but lately young adults aren’t afforded this opportunity. A knowledge gap is evident between prior generations, like the Baby Boomers, and younger generations with regards to civics. It is no surprise that Millennials are neither

⁸⁸ Achieve. 2017. *The Power of Voice: A new era of cause activations & social issue adoption*. 21.

⁸⁹ Harvard University Institute of Politics. "Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service." 2017: 22.

⁹⁰ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 36.

⁹¹ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016.

civically responsible or active in the same way their generational peers are. The decline in civic education may not have a direct effect on voter behavior, but at least students can be informed on domestic civic knowledge and global affairs. And as we continue to transition into toward a more globalized society, those two subjects bare a heavy weight on our emerging adults.

As discussed earlier, voter turnout does not seem to be increasing with time. Rather, turnout appears to be static. Civic education is thought to be one of the many factors that influence voter turnout. In the process of this thesis, no single data source provided enough support to identify a direct correlation between civic education and voter turnout. Instead, data from multiple sources bring to light a nation-wide concern for civic literacy in young adults. Civically active citizens are the pillars of a functioning democracy, however, without civically literate adults only a shadow of our democracy remains.

Surveys and polls suggest voting is a vital aspect in a democracy, yet turnout remains abysmal. Civic education is said to build upon the civic knowledge, creating more informed citizens who are more likely to vote. Yet civic education is not among academic priorities. After reviewing different literature and data, there are two facts that can be supported. The first is that voter turnout rates increase with age as the voter continues to immerse themselves into civic life. The second notable trend is that voter turnout does not seem to be increasing, but instead may be fixed. What can also be said is that civic education has shifted in priority since the 1960s, and although it may not

have a direct correlation to voter turnout, youth civic knowledge remains lower than their adult counterparts.

Discussion

This thesis began by looking at civic education, and how a general decline in civic curriculum affects civic knowledge and literacy. Under the premise that voter trends are being influenced by a gap in civic knowledge, the thesis went on to explore the importance of voting, and the civic duty that accompanies it. From there findings from surveys and assessments, as well as responses by students were collected and evaluated to better understand current civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in recent high school and college graduates.

The collaborated findings support voting as an important civic duty, while acknowledging civic literacy as anemic and not likely to improve over time. This is particularly true with Millennials who are already known for their lackluster performance in voter turnout. Even with factoring college graduates into the equation, studies do not suggest civic knowledge as improving. Although a clear correlation between civic education and voting behavior could not be established, an open dialogue can be made about a general decrease in political engagement. Young adults find voting an important aspect of civic life and facilitating change. However, when it comes to understanding the purpose and process of voting, U.S. history, and the intricacies of the U.S. government, older generations have far more knowledge.

CHAPTER 2: Apathy and Alienation Perpetuating Distrust in the Political System

“While they [Millennials] remain passionate about their desire for a better world for more people, they are turning away from organizations and institutions the public has traditionally looked for landmark social change. Today, millennials believe they can count on only themselves to create the kind of change they want to see in their communities, their country and their world.”⁹²

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the United States is underperforming in voter turnout rates every election cycle. Compared to their industrialized counterparts, in 2016 the U.S. had fallen just shy of being dead last, holding the rank of 31 out of 35.⁹³ With the U.S. among the top ten leaders in the world, voter turnout rates are of consistent concern. It is with proper research and strong theoretical frameworks that effort can be made to increase turnout, especially among youth.

⁹² Achieve. A letter from Derrick Feldman. *Final Report: Cause Engagement During a U.S. Presidential Election Year*. Report. Millennial Impact Report, 2017: 2.

⁹³ DeSilver, Drew. “U.S. Voter Turnout Trails Most Developed Countries.” *Pew Research Center*, August 02, 2016, retrieved December 05, 2016.

What must first be done is to identify why low voter turnout rate is so problematic. The leading answer is distrust. In 2016 the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) downgraded the U.S. in its Democracy Index, identifying the country as a “flawed democracy” rather than a previously recognized “full democracy.” So, what is this new label that rests upon the shoulders of the United States? A flawed democracy has free and fair elections, while respecting basic civil liberties. But the flaws remain clear – the U.S. has governance problems and low levels of political engagement, specifically in voter turnout.⁹⁴

Growing distrust has been building over the years, translating into lower levels of political participation.⁹⁵ The Pew Research center recently wrote an article about public trust in the government, depicting record low numbers. Since 1958 with President Eisenhower in office, 73 percent of surveyed participants reported trusting the government always or most of the time.⁹⁶ As of December 2017, 18 percent of Americans trust the government to do the right thing.⁹⁷ While peaking sporadically over the past 59 years, public trust in the government is not likely to turnaround. This is seen across all generations, but the younger generation garners most of the attention. Compare this next to the United States’ low voter turnout rates and it illustrates exactly why we were ranked 16 in Democracy Rankings.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Holodny, Elena. "The US has been Downgraded to a 'Flawed Democracy'" *Business Insider*, January 25, 2017.

⁹⁵ Bell, Peter. "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*. May 3, 2017.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Global Democracy Ranking. "Democracy Ranking 2015." Democracy Ranking. Last modified 2015.

In the 2016 Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders (I-VT), held a large base of minority voters – including that of youth, Latinos, and African Americans. Similar to the campaign of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential Election, Bernie Sanders gained the trust of youth voters in the Democratic Primary.⁹⁹ Between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, less than 1.6 million ballots were cast in their favor, whereas Bernie Sanders saw support from 29 percent more Millennials under the age of 30.¹⁰⁰ However, after the results of the Democratic presidential primary, youth (ages 18-29 years old) were hesitant to side with Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Exit polls suggest a split between those who stayed within party lines, and those who stepped across the aisle to vote for Republican candidate Donald Trump.¹⁰¹ One article suggests this split occurred because the difference in ideological leanings, rather than political party.¹⁰²

If there is substance to this argument, there may be something to say about voter populations feeling alienated. A contributing factor in feelings of alienation may be the difficulty in identifying political parties aligning to a voter's ideological leanings. Is it surprising to find voters, especially those who identify as being marginalized, to feel they are not being represented within their own party? In the 21st century, the gap in Democratic and Republican ideological views have widened (See *Figure 3*). This gap in political ideology is doing little to unite voters. According to data from the Pew Research

⁹⁹ Stein, Jeff. "Sanders Is Beating Obama's 2008 Youth Vote Record. And the Primary's Not Even over." *Vox*, June 2, 2016

¹⁰⁰ Blake, Aaron. "More Young People Voted for Bernie Sanders than Trump and Clinton Combined - by a Lot."

¹⁰¹ Kurtzleben, Danielle. "Here's How Many Bernie Sanders Supporters Ultimately Voted For Trump." *NPR*. NPR. August 24, 2017.

¹⁰² Smith, Samantha. "A Wider Ideological Gap Between More and Less Educated Adults." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, April 26, 2016.

Center, 45 percent of Millennials “express consistently liberal or mostly liberal views,” in contrast to the older generations.¹⁰³ This difference makes it difficult to relate to older generations with stronger ties to political parties, or strong liberal or conservative leanings.

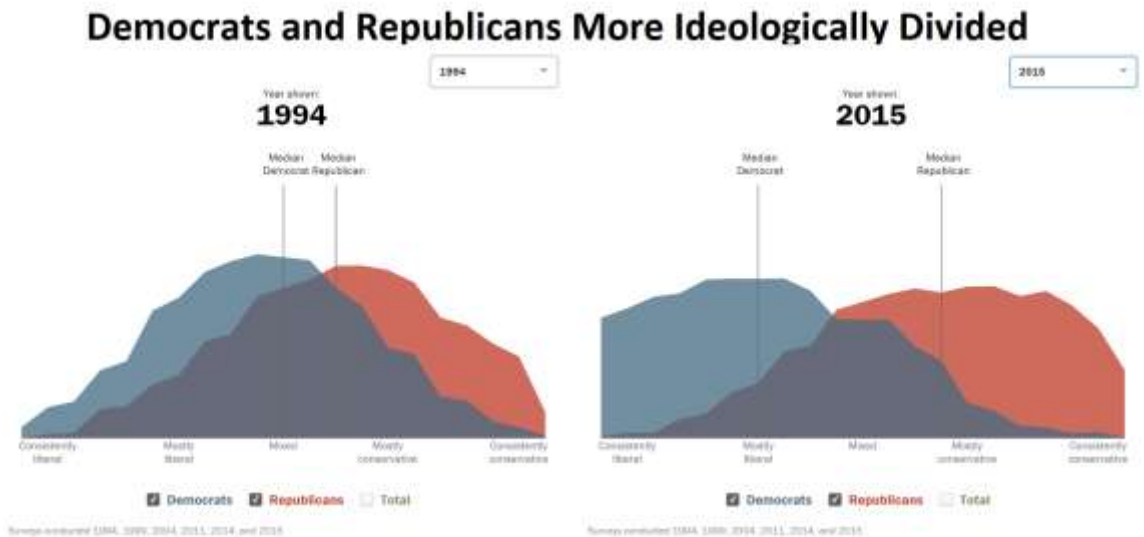


Figure 3: Smith, Samantha. 2016. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

First, those who do not turn out are more likely to be marginalized groups. Second, those who are marginalized, or consider themselves disenfranchised by the system, will irrevocably affect turnout rates. This can then be seen perpetuating a cyclical trend of low turnout. Those who are marginalized consist of people with disabilities, those without a valid ID, felony convictions (which include those of marijuana convictions), undocumented immigrants, low-income, those who are homeless or without an address, and indigenous communities.

¹⁰³ Smith, Samantha. “A Wider Ideological Gap Between More and Less Educated Adults.”

More recently establishment politics have failed to capitalize on the economically-marginalized group of the white, working-class Americans. Comprising 34 percent of the electorate in 2016, the working class is identified as earning less than fifty-thousand a year.¹⁰⁴ Of those who face the most severe economic marginalization are young people, women, African Americans, and Latinos.¹⁰⁵ Many, if not all, of these groups are a majority of the middle-class. The middle-class is not solely comprised of the white, working-class Americans. Instead, it is comprised of a diverse group of people including those of low-income, various racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages. This diverse group of people also face what is known as “voter purge” from rolls in the U.S. election system. If the voter moved states, there is a likeliness they could be registered in more than one state. There is also an issue of voters who pass away, who may still be listed as active. To mitigate the issue of duplicating or maintaining voters, a federally mandated purge of voters occurs. If a voter does not turnout for two consecutive federal elections, they can be taken off the rolls.¹⁰⁶

Unequal voting is best portrayed by Wade who describes the majority as having the “most to lose when their voices aren’t heard: the poor and unemployed, the working poor, those clinging by their fingernails to what used to be a “middle class” existence and our young people.”¹⁰⁷ Combine this with the younger Millennials, who are acknowledged as part of the marginalized population, current turnout rates do little to

¹⁰⁴ Hudak, John. "A Reality Check on 2016's Economically Marginalized." *Brookings Institution*, November 22, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Fessler, Pam. "Why Voters Could Be Removed from the Rolls." *NPR*. April 20, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Donna Wade, "It's the Turnout, Stupid!," *Lesbian News*, 39, no. 10 (May 2014): 8.

proportionately represent our electorate. It is with consideration of this, amongst other factors, that voter turnout should be a priority for reforming the system. Further efforts should also be taken to curtail marginalized groups and to identify deficient areas within the democratic process.

Research Question and Objectives

This chapter will attempt to find a connection between apathy and alienation and forms of engagement. Although apathy and alienation are separate issues facing Millennials, both will be looked at interchangeably in this research. Effort will be made to reject the notion of Millennials being too entitled and selfish to be politically engaged. Instead, it is argued that Millennials do care, but are alienated from the system or hold apathetic attitudes toward the democratic process. This results in decreased desire to vote. Millennials care about the issues set before them but opt to engage in other methods that are not as familiar to older generations. Whether apathy or alienation, or a combination of the two, is correlated to low turnout, Millennials are redirecting their political interests to other means.

Researching this problem will help this area of research in two distinct ways. It will first help better understand Millennial interests and motivations. By reaching across this cleavage of uncertainty, we can identify the issues that displease this cohort and increase efforts in revamping the system. Second, readers, including companies,

organizations, and the political sphere, will be able to better understand how to optimize Millennial engagement in a broad sense.

Literature Review

Within each theory there are numerous schools of thought or variables which may affect political engagement. What first must be done is to understand the very foundation of what “political engagement” entails. According to Morris Rosenberg, what we currently call political engagement, is also known as political activity, and it involves “...political discussion, consumption of political communications, interest, voting, and participation in political organizations.”¹⁰⁸ At this time, the conceptualized definition of political engagement will be used in a similar fashion. Of the theoretical approaches detailing low political engagement, two theories are leading the way to explain the enigma of the Millennial generation.

Political Apathy

Negative characteristics of this generation are said to decrease voter turnout and political engagement. That said, much of the research suggests political apathy as being key to voter turnout rates. Political apathy, defined by Morris Rosenberg, suggests it as a feeling of futile activity where “...the individual feels that even if he were active, the

¹⁰⁸ Rosenberg, Morris. "Some Determinants of Political Apathy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1954): 349-66.

political results he desires would probably not come to pass.”¹⁰⁹ This feeling of futility and marked disinterest can originate internally or externally. Internally individuals find themselves to be inadequate or without power, whereas externally the focus may be on political elites or the system itself.

Little is done to recognize this generation’s own rationale for being discouraged to vote. It is not the speculated selfishness that it stems from. From the view of many Millennials, does distrust for the government and little focus on pertinent issues qualify as relevant reasons to disengage from politics?¹¹⁰ Many individuals within or outside of this generation consider this ample evidence for political indifference. This is further supported by their limited interaction within the political theater.

Melissa Sandfort and Jennifer Haworth explored the political attitudes and beliefs of younger Millennials in politics. One Millennial, a suburban female, provided a response to their study, voicing:

“I think that the problem is not that we can’t do anything about it, we just can’t see what we can do about it. Lately, I really want to get involved in politics and I want to write letters to my congressman about issues and how I feel about it. I just turned 18 and can’t wait to register to vote. It is like they say, "The little things you do make a difference" and if we would just get together and vote we could change stuff, but it is hard to see that now.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Rosenberg, Morris. "Some Determinants of Political Apathy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1954): 349-66.

¹¹⁰ Mariah Monet, "Getting Real with Millennials and Voting," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 3, 2016.

¹¹¹ Sandfort, Melissa H., and Jennifer G. Haworth, 14.

With these younger Millennials, ages 16-18, already voicing their interest in politics, this participant's response is concerning. Here it is apparent there is interest in political engagement, but if the individual cannot see how they can make a difference, it may lead to apathetic attitudes. As the younger Millennials are identified as part of the marginalized population of voters, apathetic attitudes toward voting are not an uncommon trend. Sandfort and Haworth best described the apathetic attitudes of Millennials stating:

“...At this time in their lives these students indicated that they had resigned themselves to remaining detached--but not ignorant of--the political process, often owing to their belief that they were unwanted in a political scene dominated by their parents and grandparents.” ¹¹²

If this is an accurate depiction of how this generation feels, it is imperative to ask whether it is the innate personality of the generation itself or the democratic establishment that evokes such attitudes.

Apathy is quite the overplayed Millennial trait. In fact, most Millennials are not as disengaged from politics. They may find political participation a hassle – whether from the process, from those in power, or the options available to them, but they do care about the nation and its issues. Instead of party-centered issues this young generation concerns themselves with big ideas and issues pertaining to their circumstance - which are rarely discussed in political agendas. ¹¹³

¹¹² Sandfort, Melissa H., and Jennifer G. Haworth, 14.

¹¹³ Donna Wade, “It's the Turnout, Stupid!,”

So, what issues are pertinent enough to grab the attention of this impatient and cynical generation? It is the big issues, ones with high visibility, high controversy, and high relevance. The issues Millennials concern themselves with have the greatest effect on their futures – everyone’s futures. These includes issues of college debt and affordability, climate change and harming natural resources, the economy – including jobs, minimum wage, and family paid leave, foreign and domestic policy, gun control, terrorism, and government accountability and transparency.¹¹⁴ However, many of these issues are not at the top of lawmakers’ agendas. Meanwhile the older generations who have a stronger influence on these issues do not have the same exposure to the issues that Millennials currently face. Rather, these big issues are at the forefront of Millennial concern, but they do not have enough faith in the institution, or the older constituents, to expect results.

Political Alienation

Another theoretical framework suggests rather than being apathetic towards politics, Millennials have shifted toward alienation from the democratic process. A leading author in alienation and discontent, William Gamson describes alienation towards political institutions as believing that “such institutions put its foes in office or

Susan Page and Paul Singer, “USA Today/Rock the Vote Poll: Millennials' Agenda for the Next President,” *USA Today*, January 11, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Donna Wade, “It's the Turnout, Stupid!,”

Durham, and New Orleans, “Let's Set the World on Fire,” *The Economist*, October 16, 2014.

Mariah Monet, “Getting Real with Millennials and Voting.”

Susan Page and Paul Singer, “USA Today/Rock the Vote Poll: Millennials' Agenda for the Next President.”

Rebecca Nelson, “The Forgotten Millennials,” *New Republic*, 247, no. 9 (August 25, 2016): 8-10.

that they are rigged against preferred outcomes regardless of who the incumbents are.”¹¹⁵ In the 2016 Democratic Primary, and even the following Presidential Election, voters were outraged with the results. Amid the upset of Bernie Sander’s loss, and then the upset of Hillary Clinton’s loss, murmurs of the election being rigged was hard to ignore.¹¹⁶

Circling back to better understanding political alienation, Marvin Olsen leads the way of defining the concept of alienation. According to Olsen’s research, political alienation can be divided into two broad categories - attitudes of incapability and of discontent.¹¹⁷ Often discontent, or voluntary alienation, is interchangeably used with political apathy. In fact, it may be said that that political cynicism influences apathetic attitudes, thus affecting individuals’ engagement in politics.

Olsen’s research suggests these two categories affect the attitudes of the individual differently. Attitudes of incapability is a type of alienation where it is “involuntarily imposed upon the individual by the social system.”¹¹⁸ In turn this becomes a type of futility, which is previously discussed by Rosenberg. Olsen furthers his theoretical framework of political incapability by suggesting the types of alienation include guidelessness, powerlessness, and meaninglessness.¹¹⁹ Because the individual finds an incapability in political engagement, apathy may arise.

¹¹⁵ Gamson, William A. 1968. *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press. 57.

¹¹⁶ Klein, Ezra. “Was the Democratic Primary Rigged?” *Vox*. November 14, 2017.

¹¹⁷ Olsen, Marvin E. “Two Categories of Political Alienation,” *Social Forces* 47, no. 3 (March 1969): 288-99.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹¹⁹ Olsen, Marvin E. “Two Categories of Political Alienation,” *Social Forces* 47, no. 3 (March 1969): 288-99. 291.

The second category suggested by Olsen is attitudes of discontent. This type of alienation is “voluntarily chosen” as the individual feels the very nature of his “social world is not worth participating in.”¹²⁰ The social system itself does not provide the motivation to partake in. Rather than the feeling of futility suggested by political incapability, this category is most easily identified as “political cynicism,” or disgust with the system. The rampant cynicism sown within the Millennial generation is a concerning piece of political alienation. One Millennial respondent best emphasized this in Sandfort and Haworth’s study:

“I think there is an undercurrent of cynicism, especially towards our leaders. Basically, our generation views its leaders as idiots. If you look at the issues, what happens is that there is a very narrow base of issues and it is like voting for the lesser of two evils. Our democracy is very superficial because it is a republican society not a democratic society. What we do is vote for who is voting for these guys. We throw in our votes but it is all superficial. Basically we have two candidates but did we have any say in picking that candidate--not really. I just feel very removed from the process.”¹²¹

It is the system itself that curbs engagement by alienating the voter population and inducing feelings of cynicism. Navigating the quagmire that is the U.S. election system, and even more so the political sphere, will take far more time and experience than Millennials currently have. This is something that the Silent and Boomer generations

¹²⁰ Olsen, Marvin E. "Two Categories of Political Alienation. 291.

¹²¹ Sandfort, Melissa H., and Jennifer G. Haworth. "Whassup? A Glimpse into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation."

have had time to transition into, and is now fully immersed in.¹²² Considering this, it is unsurprising to find these individuals becoming more politically engaged as they grow older and lay down community roots.¹²³ Millennial engagement will undoubtedly increase over time, but it's the method of engagement that must be closely considered.

William Gamson aligns trust and alienation, among other basic attitudes, to the subject of "discontent."¹²⁴ In his book, Gamson associates trust as a source of inactivity stating, "if trust provides opportunities for authorities, it may provide problems for potential partisan leaders. The problems center around the conversion of potential influence into effective action and around what might be called the "apathy problem."¹²⁵ Gamson then goes on to describing the meaning of nonparticipation as an "expression of political alienation."¹²⁶ For the referenced "apathy" problem, Gamson connects it to trust suggesting that authorities or political leaders who have already established high trust with their constituents, have little need to influence them.¹²⁷ It is with this understanding of trust, alienation and apathy that political leaders must consider. If low levels of trust fuels inactivity in voters, then it is important to put forth efforts to increase trust. The cyclical relationship between trust, alienation, and apathy suggests politicians must work harder to influence their constituents – and earn their trust.

¹²² Barr, Kathleen and Tom Edmonds. "Is This Really the Year of the Youth Vote?," *Politics (Campaigns & Elections)*, October 2008, 22-27.

¹²³ Barr, Kathleen and Tom Edmonds. "Is This Really the Year of the Youth Vote?,"
Mariah Monet, "Getting real with Millennials and voting."

¹²⁴ Gamson, William A. 1968. *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press. 39.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 46.

Integration of Theories

There is a notable discrepancy between political alienation and political apathy, with blame being directed toward one side or the other. This article seeks to identify the association between the two, and better understand why Millennials disengage from politics. Alienation and apathy, as well as voter turnout, is influenced by prior events experienced, current socio-economic affairs, influence of political elites, and personal motivations. It may be said that apathy may occur on its own, but an alienated person will develop apathetic attitudes over time. An article written by Morris suggests it is neither their apathy toward, nor their alienation of politics that reduces Millennial engagement. Rather, it is a combination of the two within the democratic establishment that fosters an environment of low engagement.¹²⁸

Notable research done by Elizabeth Hollander and Nicholas Longo suggests a similar, middle of the road path.¹²⁹ In their research they found universities and college leaders should be offering non-partisan political engagement for its students.¹³⁰ This stems from the notion that youth are neither politically apathetic, nor politically alienated, but lack the tools and resources necessary to be engaged in a personal and meaningful way. Instead, they argue that college Millennials choose to be involved in

¹²⁸ Rosenberg, Morris. "Some Determinants of Political Apathy."

¹²⁹ Hollander, Elizabeth, and Nicholas V. Longo. "Student Political Engagement and the Renewal of Democracy." *Journal of College and Character*, 10, no. 1 (September 01, 2008).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

non-traditional forms of engagement and educational institutions should be supportive of this.

It is research like Hollander and Longo's that supports the theory of how an integrated approach can be acknowledged and used to improve upon Millennial engagement. Recently little research has been done to integrate the two main theories discussed above. It is due to this lack of research that holes remain in the theoretical framework of Millennial engagement. With the rise of technology and a generation that is both non-partisan and distrusting, engagement must be measured differently than it has in the past. No one theory can accurately account for the motivations behind political engagement of this generation. Seeking a middle ground between the two will provide a stronger framework to build upon and increase Millennial engagement.

Data Source

This research uses select data from one major poll, the Millennial Impact Report (MIR). Every year, in a partnership between Achieve and the Case Foundation, researchers specifically tailor a study for Millennials. Seizing the opportunity of the 2016 presidential election cycle, researchers were able to focus on Millennial engagement on a different level. While Millennial engagement remained the focal point, researchers narrowed their lens to better understand the fluctuations of engagement during and after the election. To provide support for the relationships found within the MIR, data from the Millennial Poll Analysis will be briefly used.

Methodology

For this year's focus, MIR's researchers focused on social causes and engagement by hypothesizing the following:

1. Millennials' interests in social causes will change during the political season based on a) their individual political ideology alignment, b) the final candidates chosen to represent those ideologies and c) the major social causes associated with those candidates and ideologies.
2. Millennials' cause-related engagement will increase during the political season through a) social media platforms (online activism) and b) direct "physical" support (volunteering, donating, signing petitions, etc.: traditional activism).¹³¹

The researchers of this report used a sample population of U.S. Millennials ages 18-36 recruited to proportionally reflect the U.S. Census Bureau's Millennial cohort data.

Conducted in three waves, the poll had 350 respondents per month with a total of 1,050 per wave, and 3,150 unique respondents over the course of the study.¹³²

Beginning March of 2016 three months were dedicated per wave: Wave 1 was from March through May 2016, Wave 2 was June through August, and the end of the election was covered by Wave 3 from September to November. At the end of Wave 3, researchers selected 350 respondents from the previous Waves to analyze their behavior on Election Day. As was cited in their report, this qualitative phase these

¹³¹ Achieve. *Millennials, Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Report. Millennial Impact Report, 2017.

¹³² Ibid.

respondents were not unique, but were drawn from previous Waves.¹³³ As this was a longitudinal design, the researchers had the opportunity to measure change of behavior and opinions across the entire election period.

This analysis begins by exploring leading theoretical frameworks on apathy and alienation. It will then take a closer look at key trends provided by the 2016 Millennial Impact Report which will help to identify the relationship between apathy and alienation in low voter turnout. It is upon the review of the Millennial Impact Report that the analysis will discuss why distrust plays an integral role in the prevalence of apathy and alienation in turnout.

Results

The Millennial Impact Report (MIR) highlighted many important trends, while simultaneously supporting previous work in this field. With every trend the research team identifies, more doors open to better understand Millennial engagement. The specific trends discussed below are only part of the extensive work the MIR team has accomplished. To support this chapter, only topic specific data from the MIR will be examined. This data includes Millennial activism and engagement, trust in the government, political party identification, and voter turnout. As this report is divided

¹³³ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report. Wave 3.*

into three separate waves, it is important to look at the change in responses over time, and how it has affected trends.

Trust in Government

Trust in the government has been a notable factor for political apathy, and some may even say, alienation. As William Gamson has declared, “trust in the government is a political attitude.”¹³⁴ It is with this trust voters feel encouraged to turnout. If a voter lacks trust in their government – whether it is to do the right thing or to be accountable, the voter will feel their efforts are futile. It is this sense of futility that provokes disinterest in the democratic process. Of the 350 respondents interviewed monthly since March of 2016, 1 in 5 continued to have no trust in the government. The research indicated a majority of Millennials (52 percent) held general distrust of their government.¹³⁵

Moving forward the MIR broke down trust in the U.S. government into three categories: age, gender, and party ideology. Age held the most significant results when divided between three age groups (18-24, 25-30, and 31-36-year-olds), the older spectrum of Millennials experienced a decrease in trust over time. Between Wave 1 and 3 the group of respondents 30 or older had a 9 percent decrease in trust.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, the younger Millennials held less trust in their government at the start of the research,

¹³⁴ Gamson, William A. 1968. *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press: 39.

¹³⁵ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Report. 2017: 19.

¹³⁶ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3.

but by Wave 3 a small increase in their trust of government was noted. One finding indicated a third of Millennials hold “only a little” trust in their government.¹³⁷

Party Ideology

For measuring party ideology researchers provided the participants with a scale, numbered 1-100 to identify their party affiliation. Rating to the left of 50 indicated the person was liberal, with 0 being very liberal. A rating to the right of 50 was considered conservative, with 100 identifying the person as being very conservative. With 50 as a rating, respondents identified themselves as neutral or chose other.¹³⁸ Throughout the research period neutral party identification increased. At the start of this project seven percent of the respondents identified as being neutral in their party ideologies. By the final report a neutral or apathetic response increased to eleven percent.¹³⁹

It is important to consider how political apathy may have affected the fluctuations in party identity. This increase in apathy may have been fueled by the quagmire the liberal-leaning side was facing toward the end of Wave 3. Liberal-leaning identity dropped by three percent and conservative-leaning only dropped by one percent.¹⁴⁰ A response by the researchers suggested that neutrality increased as the respondents felt “apathetic about the candidates, the election, civic involvement in general or their ability to effect change through their vote.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3.

¹⁴¹ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3: 10.

Activism and Engagement

One trend found by the research team was how Millennials perceived their impact on the United States. The response to question, “Do you believe you can make the world a better place to live?” weakened, showing more respondents felt that people like themselves could make less of an impact on the world.¹⁴² As the researchers described in one of their trends, “Throughout the research, Millennials strongly believed they could help make the United States a better place to live. By the election, the belief was held by fewer individuals, especially among females.”¹⁴³ A question to consider is whether this particular election cycle negatively affected Millennials’ perception and if it will it have a lasting affect?

Another trend showing similar results involved engagement levels. In the nine months of this research, Millennial perception and engagement were markedly different. Over the course of the three waves, positive responses to the question, “Do you believe you can effect positive change in the world?” dropped by nine-percent.¹⁴⁴ Overall engagement with a cause dropped dramatically between Wave 1 and Wave 3. Males out-performed females in engagement in every wave, however, by the end of the research period both genders saw a decline in engagement. For males, engagement dropped thirty-six percent, while female engagement dropped by fifty percent.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3: 17.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Turning Out

Of those surveyed, 85 percent of the Millennials are registered voters, and 8 out of 10 respondents indicated their plan to vote in the presidential election.¹⁴⁶ By the end of the last wave voting intentions dipped to 70 percent, peaking at 78 percent the month of the election (see *Figure 3*). Upon breaking down demographics, engagement was higher in males than females throughout the research period. In this specific trend, while general intention to vote continued to decline, the gender gap widened as the election grew closer.¹⁴⁷

Voting intentions did not significantly fluctuate when evaluated by party ideology. Across the span of the research, respondents who self-identified as either a conservative-leaning, liberal-leaning, or neutral Millennial were less sure of their actual intention to vote by the end of Wave 3. The month of October shows the biggest fluctuation, down by 11 percent since March with almost a third responding with their intention not to vote for neither major party candidates.¹⁴⁸ It was at this point that apathy or displeasure in the democratic process heightened. No matter the reasoning for the increase in apathetic attitudes, such low numbers a month out from election day held reason for concern. Regardless of the limited trust in the government or decline in engagement, voter intentions remained steady – merely dropping by three percent.

¹⁴⁶ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 1: 8.

¹⁴⁷ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3: 26.

¹⁴⁸ Achieve. Millennials, *Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Wave 3: 26.

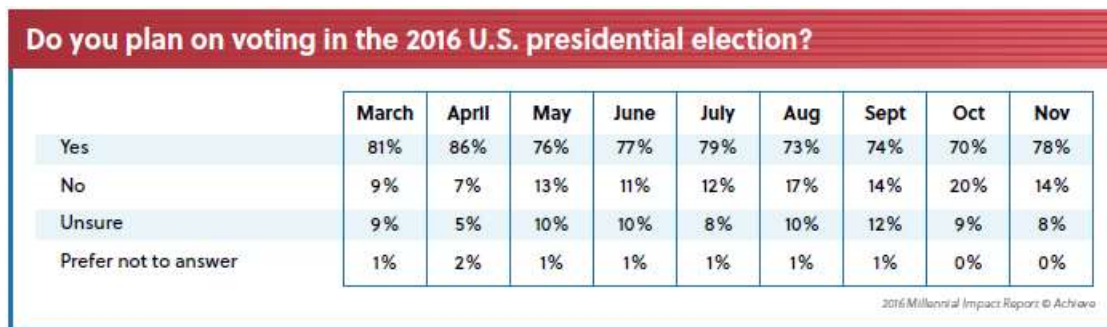


Figure 4: Millennial Impact Report Wave 3

One trend that surfaced showed an increase in apathy as Millennials became limited in their options. This increase in apathetic attitudes correlated with Millennial intention to vote. Researchers noted this to be especially relevant to Millennials who vocalized their desire to vote but did not support the Democratic or Republican party candidate.¹⁴⁹

According to the researchers of the 2016 MIR, non-voters in this election cycle did so “primarily due to some combination of apathy, distrust in what they thought of as “the system,” and dislike of both major party candidates.”¹⁵⁰ Their rationale included phrases such as “I did not feel like voting,” “Wouldn’t have made a difference due to the Electoral College,” “It’s all a joke. There is no democracy, they’re all puppets,” and “Choosing a lesser evil is still choosing a evil.”¹⁵¹ Alienation also played a fair role in Millennial turnout, as a majority of the Millennial population was not on the radar for

¹⁴⁹ Achieve. Millennials, Politics, & Causes: The 2016 Millennial Impact Report. Wave 3: 9.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 33.

political campaigns. At least, they did not receive the same level of effort other voter eligible populations had amassed over time. This lack of focus on Millennials was also found by The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). CIRCLE's 2016 Millennial Poll Analysis disclosed that of the Millennials surveyed, 7 out of 10 had not heard directly from a campaign.¹⁵² If a political campaign identifies Millennials as a large and important part of the electorate, then efforts of engagement should be much higher. CIRCLE further emphasized the issue of alienating Millennials by suggesting that individuals contacted by a campaign are far more likely to think they will vote.¹⁵³ It is this habit of indifference with the Millennial generation that perpetuates apathy and pulls down voter turnout.

Perpetuating Alienation and Apathy

At best the perception of the Millennial generation is bleak, with contrasting views as to whether this generation will help or harm the electoral system. The ability of this generation to step beyond bipartisan lines will alleviate the growing polarization of political parties. Yet it is not just the perception of Millennials and their nature which is of concern. Each generation navigates the world in which they live in through a separate lens. But it is the Millennials' experience in the democratic process that has become the focal issue.

¹⁵² CIRCLE. 2016. "2016 Election: 2016 Millennial Poll Analysis." CIRCLE, October 27: 9.

¹⁵³ CIRCLE. 2016. "2016 Election: 2016 Millennial Poll Analysis." CIRCLE, October 27: 8.

Millennials are criticized for their self-entitlement, laziness, and apathetic attitudes in politics. As their level of political engagement does not fall in line with previous generations, it is consistently scrutinized. Instead of door-knocking, wearing buttons, calling voters, and attending candidate's speaking engagements, Millennials turn to other means of engagement. Wearing buttons have turned into clicking the "like" button or promoting political posts. Speeches and debates can be viewed anytime, anywhere, and in HD – pausing, rewinding, and fast-forwarding for optimal viewing convenience. Opinions are rarely given in face-to-face interaction, but instead are posted to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. An entire method of political engagement has surfaced in response to this century and the age of information. Due to this new shift in methods the definition of political participation must include online civic activism. Millennials will be portrayed as apathetic and uninvolved in politics until this level of engagement is acknowledged.

A common misconception of the Millennial generation is their [lack of] role in politics. It is a combination of elements affecting their decision to turnout to vote. In truth, this generation does not sit on a couch, apathetically letting worldly issues pass by without a second glance. Instead Millennials post their political thoughts and accomplishments on Facebook and Twitter, engaging in politics in an instantaneous and far-reaching magnitude. Until Millennials age – settling in one area to live and becoming more familiar with the election system, their turnout rates will not be likely to change.

It is neither Millennial apathy nor alienation that is pulling down voter turnout levels. Although a likely negative correlation is noted. Apathy and alienation are

mutually exclusive, but are more likely to originate from the alienated position Millennials are placed in. Trust in government was consistently related to the trends seen in the MIR. Little to no trust in the U.S. government perpetuates apathy. This no doubt distances Millennials from the form of engagement that should otherwise have the most impact: voting. If the U.S. government cannot be trusted to make necessary changes or to do what is right, then why wade through the quagmire that is the democratic process?

One contributing factor to low turnout in Millennials is alienation from the democratic process. This perpetuates apathetic attitudes in distrust. It is these attitudes that make the cycle of distrust difficult to manage. But similar to the issue of alienation and apathy, until distrust in the political institution is addressed, it will continue to breed “conditions for the creation of further distrust.”¹⁵⁴ With increased apathy, fewer Millennials can trust political parties, nor are they able to align themselves with them. And with alienation from the system, comes alienation from all matters regarding that system – including conventional methods of engagement.

Political identities no longer hold the same value that they once did as the cleavage of bipartisanship continues to widen. It is not easy for a Millennial to identify with the contrasting major parties or to rely on party loyalty to blindly vote in an election. This is the difference. Independent or neutral political identities are increasing, and party loyalty is not what it once was. Currently trending in the face of 21st century politics are engagement efforts that receive immediate recognition and instantaneous

¹⁵⁴ Gamson, William A. 1968. *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press: 45.

results. Efforts are less cumbersome when they are mobile. And with apathy and alienation comes a lack of motivation to turn out for the election.

Overall apathy and alienation will continue to be used interchangeably in the political sphere, but it is the source of the blame which matters. Low levels of voter turnout are not solely the fault of the Millennial generation. Not only are Millennials on par with previous generations at this age, but many do not intentionally alienate themselves from the democratic process. It is the lack of trust in the government that is of the most concern. It is also the partisanship that fuels this distrust and alienates Millennials from finding a suitable party identity. This alienation is driving Millennials to associate themselves as independent or neutral. Independent identification as permits increased flexibility in supporting the issues which matter to them. The political parties do little to engage this birth cohort and ignoring the issues that are important to Millennials is their biggest setback.

Looking specifically at mobilization efforts, the Millennial generation appears to have quite the steadfast personality. Getting them off the couch and replacing their cellphones with a ballot in their hand, will be quite a task. It may even be easier to utilize the resources Millennials possess, rather than to further alienate them from what they are familiar to. However, efforts must be made to minimize the marginalization of this population. As alienation reduces, so too will apathetic attitudes and distrust. If Millennials feel welcome, trusts the institution, and knows their vote matters - turnout is likely to increase. Meanwhile Millennials promote political issues on social media platforms rather than ballots and turnout by clicking “like” and sharing content. Efforts

need to be made to encourage this population to turnout, but trust must be earned, and blame isn't the answer.

Discussion

This chapter began by asking the question whether alienation or apathy obstructs turnout, and instead if Millennials are turning to other methods of engagement. In this chapter, results from the Millennial Impact Report underscore the resurfacing issue of Millennial alienation and apathy. Although apathy and alienation continue to be separate issues in engagement, a connection between the two is apparent. Over the span of the 2016 election cycle the 2016 MIR highlighted trends that, upon further evaluation, appear to correlate to apathy and alienation. Findings derived from the MIR identifies a relationship between distrust in the government and its effect on apathy and alienation. It is evident that as the alienation and apathy of Millennials continue to rise, voter turnout sees a decline. However, the MIR showed that even with distrust as a dominant narrative in politics, Millennials still choose to be engaged. Turnout may be low, but other, less conventional means of engagement are becoming more prevalent – such as online social activism and volunteering.

CHAPTER 3: Feel Good Tactics of Millennial Slacktivists

“Social media has made Millennials more socially conscious, but it has also made it easy to be an ‘activist.’ Millennials click ‘Like’ on a Facebook post about equal pay and suddenly feel like they’ve done their part to help ‘the cause.’ But have they really contributed anything of significance?”¹⁵⁵

Introduction

Society is at the cusp of an overhaul of what was once defined as “traditional” means of communication and engagement. Just as we have witnessed the transition of in person communication and the transition from landlines to cellphones, we have also seen steps beyond that as well. Smart phones can access information instantaneously, the efficiency of communication between multiple people is unparalleled, and the global reach is limitless. Now, technology is vast and growing at an exponential pace, and what was once a seamless transition, now forces a full submersion with its users. Today, many citizens cannot go through their daily routine without a casual rendezvous with technology.

In the Digital Age, technology has become a familiar medium for U.S. citizens. This influences how citizens interact within their environment, therefore pushing society

¹⁵⁵ Sasha Dookhoo. "The Rise of Millennials Engaging in Online Slacktivism" (master's thesis, University of Central Florida, 2016), 1364.

to redefine traditional labels. And this is wherein the problem lies. Political engagement sits in a defined bubble, where other unknown or uncategorized acts of engagement are not efficiently being captured. Instead, visible criticism is circulating, combating undefined methods of engagement, and indirectly pushing society members to engage in more measurable, traditional methods.¹⁵⁶

This becomes a crisis when citizens, such as Millennials, turn toward methods of engagement conducive to their lifestyle – and that is online engagement. Online engagement is not a new concept, but over time it has grown into an undeniable force. Just as society is being swept into the Digital Age, Millennials are being guided toward familiar forms of engagement. As a generation who grew up in the Digital Age, it is not surprising to find a preference towards online engagement. But why is online political engagement not being captured? The current understanding of online political engagement is scrutinized as being unnecessary, insignificant, and lazy.¹⁵⁷ Being that online engagement is outside of conventional forms of activism, data and trends can be overlooked or simply regarded as insignificant.

¹⁵⁶ Millennial Action Project. "The Millennial "Slacktivism" Debate: A Political Perspective." Millennial Action Project.

American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016: 61. Kauffman, Gretel. "Standing Rock Facebook Check-ins: "Slacktivism", or Something More?."

¹⁵⁷ Robertson, Charlotte. "Slacktivism": The Downfall of Millennials." *The Huffington Post*. Morozov, Evgeny. "Foreign Policy: Brave New World of Slacktivism."

Research Question and Objectives

Political engagement is the essence of democratic citizenship in the United States.¹⁵⁸ Although this holds truth in many other democratized countries, it bears specific significance to the U.S. as it faces deterioration of civic engagement. Traditional means of engagement are far more familiar to prior generations, but as times are changing, so is the means of communication and political involvement.

Coincidentally, Millennials, also referenced as the ‘Digital Generation,’ are the largest voter bloc in the United States. So, what happens when an entire generation of 75 million individuals uses content sharing platforms to engage in politics? In this chapter, efforts will be made to identify Millennial motivations and intentions regarding online engagement. Is there clout behind the observation of online engagement equating to nothing more than “slacktivism”, or are Millennials pushing to redefine traditional labels of engagement?

Millennials are acclimated to online exposure, so it is not surprising to see their forum of choice to be online, rather than off. But, it is the lack of their presence offline that concerns the populace, especially critics. If Millennials are turning to online engagement, does it influence their rate of offline engagement? Does online engagement produce measurable results, or is it taking manpower from offline engagement? The objective of this third chapter is to consider the balance, and the

¹⁵⁸ Tocqueville, Alexis De, Isaac Kramnick, and Gerald E. Bevan. *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*. London: Penguin, 2003.

trade-offs, between offline and online engagement. Where does online engagement fit into the grander scheme of civic participation? Identifying how Millennials and Generation X'ers are traditionally and non-traditionally engaged in politics, will be the foundation for this chapter. The second objective is to analyze how Millennials use their online preference of online engagement in support of counter-arguing the one-dimensional term of "slacktivism."

Theoretical Background

Social Media

For this specific research, social media, also referred to as social networking sites (SNSs), is best defined by Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein.¹⁵⁹ In their report social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."¹⁶⁰ Of the SNSs, Facebook has over 2.2 billion active monthly users, in comparison YouTube coming in second with 1.5 billion users.¹⁶¹ Twitter, which is often thought as another forum for political discussion, only has 330 million active monthly users. The user base of social media is vast and continues to grow over time. The importance of understanding social media's role in political activism is to

¹⁵⁹ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶¹ Statista. "Leading Global Social Networks 2018 | Statistic." Statista, January 2018.

identify the SNSs that are conducive to online political engagement. For the purpose of this chapter only Facebook, which has the largest user base will be referenced.

Multi-faceted Engagement

Traditionally participants engage in politics without the use of social media, or other web-based resources. Efforts such as calling a representative, voting, signing petitions, and marching in demonstrations has always been the standard of engagement. Other than the traditional means of defining engagement, this research will discuss engagement offline and online. Offline, as previously discussed, is any traditional form of engagement by individuals. Online engagement will specifically focus on the use of SNSs to share information, raise awareness, and express interest in political topics. Although there are many other web-based resources for political engagement, the use of content-sharing platforms will be the focus of this chapter.

“Slacktivism”

“Slacktivism” is a word that has recently surfaced when referencing the Millennial generation and their engagement online. However, does “slacktivism” clearly define Millennials and their motivations for political involvement? According to Evgeny Morozov, who first coined the term “slacktivism” as being an online ‘feel-good’ activism with little to no significant social or political impact.¹⁶² Morozov offers “slacktivism” as

¹⁶² Statista. "Leading Global Social Networks 2018 | Statistic."

the “ideal type of activism for a lazy generation,” which in the case of Millennials, is a commonly used reference.¹⁶³

Used interchangeably with “slacktivism,” is the term “clicktivism.” While “slacktivism” offers an overarching understanding of idle engagement, the term clicktivism suggests that online engagement is merely “clicking” to be engaged.¹⁶⁴ The ease of which citizens can click a button and be engaged in politics is undeniable. Similar to what “slacktivism” states are the intent of the individual, clicktivism perpetuates the “feel good” motives of clicking an online petition, retweeting, or to ‘like’ a Facebook post. Both terms of “slacktivism” and clicktivism emphasize the underlying assumption of a failure to induce significant, real world change.

Literature Review

Political Engagement

Used interchangeably, political engagement and political participation covers a wide array of actions. Political engagement is a traditional method of being an active, civically responsible citizen. However, defining political engagement is narrow in scope, and alienates other possible measures of engagement. This in turn gives the impression

¹⁶³ Morozov, Evgeny. “Foreign Policy: Brave New World of Slacktivism.”

¹⁶⁴ Fatkin, Jane-Marie, and Terry C. Lansdown. “Prosocial Media in Action.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48 (2015): 581-86.

that engagement is far lower than it is. With voter turnout remaining static, the United States must measure and acknowledge other means of political engagement.¹⁶⁵ As voter turnout is traditionally considered a means of engagement, it is worthwhile to study whether engagement remains static across all forms. If voter turnout lacks substance, are individuals turning toward other, novel means of engagement?

In our society political activity is just another norm of citizenship. Russell Dalton discusses engagement being one of the two faces of citizenship, suggesting democratic citizenship is dual-dimensional: dutiful and engaged.¹⁶⁶ Commonly agreed upon to be important elements of citizenship, duties are typical requirements of democratic citizens. These duties include that of jury duty, obeying the law, reporting a crime, and serving in the military.¹⁶⁷ Not surprisingly voting also falls into this dimension. Although voting is acknowledged to be an important aspect of political engagement, it remains separate from traditional means of engagement.

Engaged Citizenship, “spans several elements that are typically described as liberal or communitarian norms of citizenship,” with participation falling therein.¹⁶⁸ Of the four items which fall within the engaged citizenship dimension, two participation examples of “being active in civil society groups and general political activity,” are amongst them.¹⁶⁹ The other two elements of Dalton’s engagement-based dimension

¹⁶⁵ McDonald, Michael. "Voter Turnout Demographics." United States Elections Project, 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Dalton, Russell J. "Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation." *Political Studies* 56, no. 1 (2008): 76-98: 80.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

include “supporting of worse off in America” and “forming one’s own opinion” are also noted.¹⁷⁰ In Dalton’s article the importance of separating duty-based citizenship and engagement is emphasized, but does not fail to mention the mixture of both dimensions in the composition of citizenship.

According to Dalton’s suggestion, it is important to note social media and online engagement falling into the engagement-based dimension. Therefore, with voting considered a separate type of citizenship – that of a duty, other means of engagement should be properly considered in this paper. This should also give reason to look directly at unconventional means of engagement that are not the norms of citizenship or engagement. If a tradeoff is occurring between voting to more novel means of engagement, it should be properly measured. Trends in engagement and, more importantly, voting is shifting, but in which direction are trends heading? This is just another concern for researchers in this field that should be considered. Dalton offers that citizenship norms will no doubt influence the participation trends facing Digital America.¹⁷¹

The Digital Age will continue to influence trends in political interests and participation. Looking back toward the norms of an engaged citizen, participation included activity in groups and general political activity. General political activity must therefore include traditional and novel activities. An array of acknowledged activities

¹⁷⁰ Dalton, Russell J. "Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation." *Political Studies* 56, no. 1 (2008): 76-98: 83.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 84.

includes: marching, wearing buttons, signing petitions, calling a representative, door-knocking, and as a citizenship duty, voting. However, it is important to note that lack of language describing any activities done online. Online participation, which is not limited to, watching political advertisements and videos, signing online petitions, following political leaders, engaging in political discourse, retweeting, sharing, or 'Liking' a post, being a member of an online political group, and online donations, are all relevant online activities that are either disregarded or garner limited attention from critics.

Online Engagement

Socio-economic standards (SES), such as educational attainment and occupation, do not explain political interests. Rather, one study found once political interests were considered, SES were not a reliable measure.¹⁷² The driving motivation behind online political engagement appears to correlate with political interest. Keating and Melis' findings also suggest the Internet does not "appear to be mobilising a new audience or extending the type of young adults who are politically engaged."¹⁷³ Instead the authors offer that those who are engaging online are already interested in politics.

It is with this that other critics, such as Malcolm Gladwell, offer that online political participation only increases because of the lack of "motivation that participation requires."¹⁷⁴ A lack of motivation, or laziness, in the realm of political

¹⁷² Keating, Avril, and Gabriella Melis. "Social Media and Youth Political Engagement: Preaching to the Converted or Providing a New Voice for Youth?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 4 (2017): 877-94.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 891.

¹⁷⁴ Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change." *The New Yorker*. June 19, 2017.

engagement is commonly referred to as “slacktivism.” This term is often coupled with the efforts made by Millennials in any attempt at online political engagement. Critics push this notion as being insignificant and not producing measurable results.¹⁷⁵ One author, Sasha Dookhoo, from the Institute of Public Relations perpetuates the critical opinion of “slacktivism” as being a “low-cost, low-risk activism which occurs in an online setting.”¹⁷⁶ This does not differ from the voices of critics, rather solidifying a resonating theme.

Millennials are more commonly brought up in conversation involving online engagement and “slacktivism.” The understanding is that Millennials, and every generation after them, are so attune to the Digital Age and content-sharing platforms, that it makes them the primary target for criticism. This criticism stems from their high Web usage, and constant phone-in-hand presence. For a generation thought to be both lazy and selfish, online engagement from this generation is chalked up to be nothing more than “slacktivism” at work. But do Millennials engage in online political activity for no other reason than to feel good, or because it is simple to click ‘Like’ or to share a post? Research varies on this opinion and does not neatly fall into a uniform category.

Is it “slacktivism”? The dominant narrative suggests it is. Researchers argue that online engagement produces insignificant change in the political sphere.¹⁷⁷ Liking,

¹⁷⁵ Conroy, Meredith, Jessica T. Feezell, and Mario Guerrero. “Facebook and Political Engagement: A Study of Online Political Group Membership and Offline Political Engagement.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(5), 1525-1546, September 2012.

Morozov, Evgeny. “Foreign Policy: Brave New World of Slacktivism.”

Millennial Action Project. “The Millennial ‘Slacktivism’ Debate: A Political Perspective.”

¹⁷⁶ Sasha Dookhoo. “The Rise of Millennials Engaging in Online Slacktivism.”

¹⁷⁷ Harvey, Kerric. *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2014.

sharing, or posting about politics makes such little difference that it frequently goes unnoticed. Online political activity may not directly influence issues, but it quickly and effectively increases awareness among the online population, as it can be seen by popular online movements. This efficiency of information exchange is thought to be the driving force behind key movements such as Arab Spring, Kony2012, ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, and #BringBackOurGirls.¹⁷⁸

The magnitude of Facebook users who participated in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was difficult to ignore, but critics like Arielle Pardes from *The Vice* immediately argued that it's "basically narcissism masked as altruism."¹⁷⁹ Pardes best personified common criticism of the social media phenomenon stating:

This is the crux of Millennial "hashtag activism," where instead of actually *doing* something, you can just *pretend* like you're doing something by posting things all over your Facebook. Like the Ice Bucket Challenge, good causes end up being a collective of social media naval gazing. We reflected on our favorite social-movements-gone-viral and found out what happened to them after the fell off our Twitter feeds. Because, yes, social problems continue even after you stop hashtagging them.¹⁸⁰

Contrary to this criticism, the 2014 ALS Ice Bucket Challenge generated \$115 million in research money. Standing Rock was another online campaign that shows the power

Kauffman, Gretel. "Standing Rock Facebook Check-ins: "Slacktivism", or Something More?."

¹⁷⁸ Kauffman, Gretel. "Standing Rock Facebook Check-ins: "Slacktivism", or Something More?."

¹⁷⁹ Pardes, Arielle. "Dumping a Bucket of Ice on Your Head Does Not Make You a Philanthropist." *Vice*. August 13, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

behind networked citizens and quick access to information. The concern with this is whether substantial change was made, and if it falls under the category of political engagement. Checking-in on Facebook to North Dakota's Standing Rock Indian Reservation went viral, elevating visibility of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protest. This trend in checking-in and the increased awareness of the protest propelled Facebook users to not only vocalize their opinions online, but to turn out and join the protest in North Dakota themselves.¹⁸¹ Political participation maintains a level awareness for the participants as they engage in activities driven by their political concerns. If online engagement increases awareness to an audience beyond the self, does it produce measurable change or does the method of producing the awareness reduce its value? These are questions surfacing amidst the discussion of the right and wrong, traditional and untraditional means of engagement.

Active online engagement of politics is a different matter. One study noted Millennials did not actively search for political news and information, rather, they stumbled upon it on their Facebook and Twitter feed.¹⁸² The study itself was to look at how Millennials evaluate political candidates, but the researchers found other evidence suggesting online political exposure was not intentional, but a "consequence of bumping into the information while browsing the web."¹⁸³ With the internet and information sharing being a common occurrence, this lack of active information seeking

¹⁸¹ Pardes, Arielle. "Dumping a Bucket of Ice on Your Head Does Not Make You a Philanthropist."

¹⁸² Douglas, Sara, Roxanne B. Raine, Misa Maruyama, Bryan Semaan, and Scott P. Robertson. "Community Matters: How Young Adults Use Facebook to Evaluate Political Candidates." *Information Polity*, 20 (2015): 135-50.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 140.

suggests one of two things: Millennials are in fact lazy and not politically engaged, or there is a reason to lack participatory motivations which stifles motivation and intent.

According to Douglas and her associates, it is not laziness or disinterest in politics that negatively drive levels of online engagement, rather it is the repercussion of online participation.¹⁸⁴ Information sharing is efficient, timely, and as close to instantaneous as an exchange can be. Technology has increased the parameters of information sharing, the far spread reach of the audience and its virality is incomparable. Because of this, social media users and web browsers are conscious of what is being shared, posted, or liked. Not only does this content reach other users, but this information is broadcasted to their personal audience as well. One of the most prominent findings of Douglas, Raine, Maruyama, Semaan, and Robertson's article was the inevitable opinions of their peers. They noted, "one reason participants gave for not actively seeking out information was aversion to the negativity that could be incited by political discussion."¹⁸⁵ The researchers went on citing, "most of the participants avoided seeking political information on SNSs due to the perception they would encounter flaming or an unproductive cacophony of opinions."¹⁸⁶ However, the ease at which SNSs can be utilized for means of communication is undeniable. The speed, efficiency, and convenience of the Web, specifically social media, is an important component of the 21st century lifestyle.

¹⁸⁴ Douglas, Sara, Roxanne B. Raine, Misa Maruyama, Bryan Semaan, and Scott P. Robertson. "Community Matters: How Young Adults Use Facebook to Evaluate Political Candidates."

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 140.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 141.

Social Media as a 21st Century Landline

Communication is a constant variable in society, but the method of communication varies over time. Contacting a voter was once as easy as calling their landline or knocking on their door. Leave a message if they don't pick up, leave an informational flyer if they don't open the door. Now it is quite as simple. Leave a voicemail on their landline, call their cellphone[s], knock on their door, send an email, advertise on the TV, on the radio, in print, online. There are so many interworking variables, and numerous methods of reaching a voter. Now with the rise of content-sharing platforms, or social networking sites (SNS), there is another method that needs to be acknowledged and utilized. Social media has become the 21st century 'landline' of communications.

Not only are political campaigns known for communicating with their voters online, but other organizations have chosen this outreach method as well. In a study done by Jonathan Obar, Paul Zube, and Clifford Lampe, 100 percent of the surveyed organizations indicated they used social media to interact with citizens.¹⁸⁷ A strong indicator of the importance of social media found that 47 of the 48 groups surveyed, all varying in size, used Facebook as a tool for communication, and 46 used Twitter.¹⁸⁸ Using social media as a tool to connect to a target constituency is not a novel idea. Widely known for his strong online campaigning, Barack Obama utilized the resource

¹⁸⁷ Obar, Jonathan A., Paul Zube, and Clifford Lampe. "Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action." *Journal of Information Policy*, 2 (2012): 1-25.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 11.

that is online engagement to target young voters.¹⁸⁹ It was not until his successful targeting was social media embraced as a viable and inexpensive solution to target voters. This shift in understanding the opportunities of the Web is gradual, but an important component of the shifting expectations of conventional engagement.

Globalization and Shifting Expectations of Engagement

The potential for online engagement to influence politics is vast. No other resource has the speed, quality, and efficiency the Web offers. Globalization, a new phenomenon occurring throughout the world, allows users to communicate in real time across a large geographical expanse.¹⁹⁰ The term itself has gained popularity in tandem to the rise of the World Wide Web. As worldly citizens we are connected, sharing experiences and historical events. The emergence of this communication type is undeniably efficient and is spilling over into the area of political engagement, if only society can overcome the criticized drawbacks.

An author from the *Huffington Post* wrote an online article discussing one specific drawback: disconnection. Charlotte Robertson drew her readers attention by asking: "...As we connect, do we also disconnect?"¹⁹¹ We may be connecting on a global level, but is technology's screen creating a barrier of artificial engagement? This

¹⁸⁹ Katz, James Everett. *The Social Media President. Barack Obama and the Politics of Digital Engagement*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁹⁰ Robertson, Charlotte. "Slacktivism": The Downfall of Millennials."

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

translates directly to political engagement. Traditional means of engagement, or activism, is no longer the status quo. SNSs are exposing users to global social justice messages, while the platforms support efficiency and timeliness. Marches, physical petitions, town halls, and everything in-between are efforts of the past. Charlotte Robertson considers online engagement efforts to be isolating and emotionally-void, all the while perpetuating systematic oppression.¹⁹² There might be some truth to this. However, there is opportunity in the what lies ahead. Recognizing this opportunity and identifying social media users, whose intent goes beyond “feeling good,” will help facilitate a transition into a more globally recognized form of engagement.

Data Source

The *Millennial Impact Report* has continued to be an immeasurable resource in this thesis and continues to be one in this specific chapter. Limited resources were available to argue against the negative connotation of “slacktivism” and online engagement. However, with the Millennial Impact Report and specific data from the Harvard Institute of Politics, and the Nielsen Social Media Report, a strong argument recognizing online engagement may be tangible.¹⁹³ By using multiple sources, it is important to synthesize their results to identify similar themes and trends that are relevant to this research. As neither report or study uses similar methodologies, each individual methodology will be discussed below.

¹⁹² Robertson, Charlotte. “Slacktivism”: The Downfall of Millennials.”

¹⁹³ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*.

Methodology

Millennial Impact Report 2017

Two major Millennial Impact Reports have been published since the 2016 presidential election, one in 2016 and the other was recently published in 2017. Each report was broken into three waves, or phases, and published at various times throughout the past two years. Unlike the 2016 Millennial Impact Reports, the 2017 report used a “purposive sample of Millennials’ attitudes and perceptions toward social issues to inform the structure of subsequent research for this study.”¹⁹⁴ The Achieve researched started this study with qualitative data, and then followed a quantitative approach. For this chapter, references will be made toward all three phases of the 2017 Millennial Impact Report (MIR).

The phases were designed to take place at separate times, with each phase having a separate methodology. Phase 1 had a qualitative design comprised of interviews and focus groups which took place in April of 2017. Phase 2 focused on the investigative nature of the project, utilizing surveys on the research sample between July 19 – August 8, 2017. The structure of Phase 2 was to investigate previous findings and revelations from the first Phase of the 2017 study. The third phase, an ethnographic inquiry, has yet to be released to the public. Considering the intent of this chapter, this chapter primarily focuses on phase 2 – with the details of the methodology discussed below.

¹⁹⁴ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 3.

The methodology of Phase 2 of the 2017 Millennial Impact Report had a sample population of 3000 individuals. 51 percent of the respondents were female, and over half of the sample identified as White/Caucasian. Those included in the study fell between the ages of 18 to 37, with 4 out of 10 respondents being under the age of 24. Noting the importance of external validity, the research team briefly discussed the method of collecting a representative sample population of U.S. Millennials:

To form a pool of potential respondents that would be representative of U.S. Millennials ages 18-37, the research team used quota sampling to provide a proportional sample based on U.S. Census Bureau Millennial cohort data for gender, race, age, education level and geographic region, then drew a nonprobability sample of 3,000 participants matching these demographics from an opt-in panel.¹⁹⁵

In this phase of the 2017 report, the Achieve team deliberately focused on respondents' interests and engagement in 21st century politics. Specifically, the second phase of MIR looked at the following topics:

- Why, how and at what level they engaged in these causes and/or social issues.
- Which of their actions did or did not achieve the desired outcomes.
- How their attitudes and behaviors had changed or remained the same since the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Derived from what the MIR research team collected, the chapter can look directly at Millennials' interests and engagement.

¹⁹⁵ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 6.

Harvard Institute of Politics

For the effort of this thesis, data has been drawn from two Harvard Institute of Politics polls. The referenced polls, conducted by KnowledgePanel®, includes a poll from the Fall of 2013 and Spring of 2017.¹⁹⁶ The Fall 2013 KnowledgePanel® surveyed 2,089 Millennials between the ages of 18-29 years old. The survey titled, “Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service” was the 24th edition to contribute to this field and was completed between the dates of October 30 – November 11, 2013.¹⁹⁷ The 33rd edition of the poll was conducted from March 10 – 24, 2017. Although more than five thousand young adults were assigned to the study, the poll only had a 52 percent cooperation rate, thereby collecting 2,650 interviews. For both polls the relevant data was used in support of the research question.

The Nielsen Report

The 2017 Nielsen Report provided data on social media use for each specific generational cohort. The Nielsen group excels in offering various types of programs and measurements to best analyze social media use. However, for this chapter social media and networking sites usage through the PC, tablets, and smartphones are the focus. In the United States approximately 9,000 smartphones and 1,300 tablet panelists were used to complete the report. This report, which analyzes social media usage across various demographics, using device penetration for PC and tablets, and Nielsen’s

¹⁹⁶ Harvard University Institute of Politics. "Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service, 24th edition."

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Electronic Mobile Measurement (EMM) for mobile devices. EMM is an “observational, user-centric approach that uses passive metering technology on smartphones and tablets to track device and application usage on an opt-in convenience panel, recruited online.”¹⁹⁸

Being cognizant of the difference between PC and smartphone use, PC Social Network includes “all sites in the Member Communities subcategory as defined in the Nielsen NetView Dictionary, Smartphone and Tablet Social Network includes all apps/sites in the Social Networking subcategory as defined in the Nielsen EMM dictionary.”¹⁹⁹ The list of top social networking sites is compiled based upon the uniqueness of the panelists, and all activities on these sites are tracked without interruption. It is with reference towards these data sources this paper can begin exploring leading theoretical frameworks on social media and engagement. Delving deeper into these frameworks is a discussion on both offline and online engagement. Considering the Millennial generation’s role [or lack thereof] in politics, the concepts of a “networked citizen” and “slacktivism” will be major points of discussion.

Results

The results provided herein are derived from multiple sources, including that of The Millennial Impact Report, The Nielsen Report, and The Harvard Institute of Politics. This thesis identifies the sources listed above as important references to identify specific

¹⁹⁸ Casey, Sean. "The 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report." Nielsen, January 17, 2017: 27.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 27.

relationships in online political engagement. It is with this consideration the identified relationships found from all sources will be discussed.

Get off Facebook, Gen Xers

The most common misunderstanding of social media is accurately identifying its users. Millennials are at the forefront of this discussion, but they are not alone. The *2016 Nielsen Social Media Report* takes this commonly agreed upon notion and suggests Millennials are not alone in their heavy social media usage. This report identifies heavy users as individuals who spend over 3 hours per day online – and it is not Millennials who are given this title.²⁰⁰ Generation X, the parent generation of Millennials, spend an average of 7 hours per week on social media.²⁰¹ To offer a comparison, Millennials log an average of 40 minutes less than Generation X. This average of six to seven hours a week on social media is neither surprising or concerning.

The internet and social media use is a defining characteristic of the Digital Age. Those who are the most familiar with technology, specifically the internet and social media, will be naturally more inclined to engage online. It is with this understanding that it is not surprising to find both Millennials and Generation X dedicating hours to their social media platforms. The largest gap in social media usage comes from adults 50 years and older who spend 30 percent less time on social media than their birth cohort neighbor, Gen X.²⁰² This segregation clearly identifies the engaged users and those who find comfort in the conventional. Researchers from Pew Internet, a project of the Pew

²⁰⁰ Casey, Sean. "The 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report." Nielsen, January 17, 2017.

²⁰¹ Casey, Sean. "The 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report." Nielsen, January 17, 2017: 6.

²⁰² Ibid., 6.

Research Center, supported this sentiment stating, “[political] activities are more likely to be pursued by younger social media users compared with the social media users who are ages 50 or older.”

Online Political Engagement

Looking directly at the relationship between social media and political engagement, researchers from the Pew Internet Project highlights their key findings in a graph, indicating the difference in age groups and the percentage of users who used social media in a specific way (See *Figure 5*).²⁰³ Of these participants, 66 percent indicated ‘yes’ to using social media as a tool for civic activities. The most relevant and straight-forward finding asserts that individuals who regularly talk politics offline also engage in political discourse online.²⁰⁴ It is with this research the discrepancy between the older generations’ use of social media for civic activities can be seen. As mentioned in Nielsen’s Social Media Report it is Generation X who are heavy social media users. However, the Pew Internet Project’s findings suggest Millennials are more likely to use social media as a tool for civic engagement compared to Generation X.

²⁰³Rainie, Lee., Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sidney Verba. “Social Media and Political Engagement” *Pew Research Center*, October 19, 2012.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Younger social media users are more likely to use the tools for civic activities

% of users of social networking sites or Twitter who use social media these ways

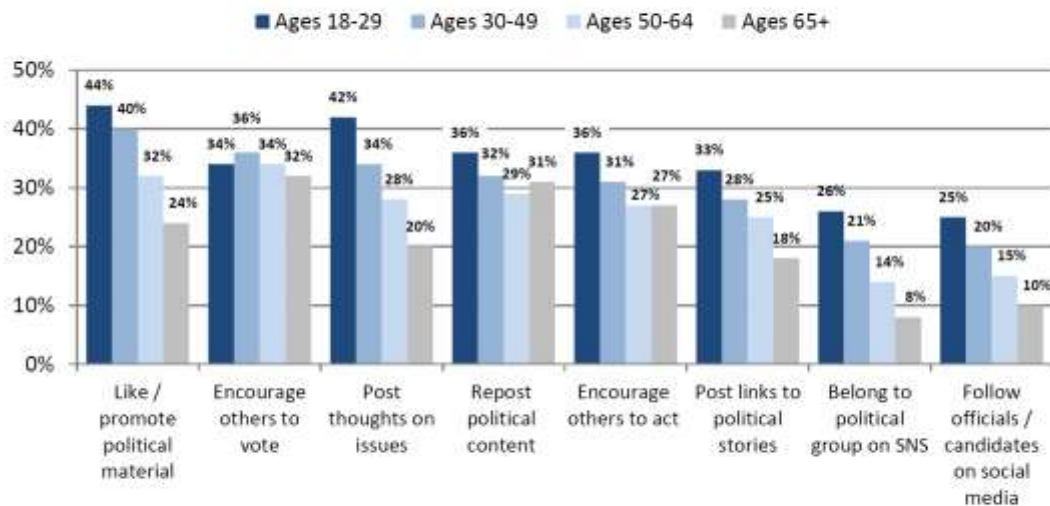


Figure 5: Pew Research Center

The “Easy Button” of Political Engagement

The ease with which political discourse can be engaged in and shared online is incomparable to other methods. Efforts of explaining this phenomenon almost immediately points towards “slacktivism.” However, no matter how easy it is to engage online, it does not mean these efforts should be hastily categorized as lazy, or of selfish intent. Research suggests there is some evidence to support an underlying amount of “slacktivism” occurring within the ranks of Millennials, but it is not all-encompassing. There are individuals like researchers from the Pew Internet Project, that suggest a

relationship between those who are politically active offline and their activity levels online.²⁰⁵

It is the accessibility of the internet that facilitates political engagement across all channels of engagement. Aaron Smith from the Pew Research Center found that of the participants surveyed in his study, “53% of political SNS users have expressed their opinion about a political or social issue through offline channels.”²⁰⁶ Similarly, results from the Harvard Institute of Politics suggests a positive relationship between social media use and political engagement.²⁰⁷ Specifically, of the surveyed who identified having three or more social media accounts, 73 percent were registered to vote and of that only 67 percent turned out to vote in the 2012 election.²⁰⁸

Social media platforms continue to be a strategic outlet for online users. In the 2016 Millennial Impact Report, two-thirds of Millennials indicated their preference toward using social media platforms to post, either by creating original posts, or commenting or reposting another’s, about personally meaningful social issues. Facebook continues to be the most popular platform for online political engagement, used by 91 percent of Phase 2 participants in the 2016 Millennial Impact Report.²⁰⁹ Since the 2016 election, 42 percent of all respondents indicated that “the number of times

²⁰⁵ Rainie, Lee., Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sidney Verba. “Social Media and Political Engagement.”

²⁰⁶ Smith, Aaron. “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age.” *Pew Research Center*, April 25, 2013.

²⁰⁷ Harvard University Institute of Politics. “Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service.” *Harvard IOP Survey*, Fall 2013.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Achieve. *The 2016 Millennial Impact Report Wave 2 Trends. The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Report. Millennial Impact Report, 2016.

I've posted or shared content on a social media platform that supports or protests this topic" has increased.²¹⁰ Stemming from this finding, respondents also indicated that social media engagement has "increased" or "increased a lot" for activists, advocates, and allies.²¹¹

The Changing Direction of Political Engagement

Online engagement and social media is not regarded as a strong influence in the realm of politics. Although Millennials continue to rank social media high among cause/social issue-related behaviors they usually take – unsurprising in today's prominent digital landscape, "it dropped significantly when respondents were asked which of their actions were most likely to bring about change."²¹² Offline, traditional methods of engagement is still seen as the most influential way to create change. Voting itself is strongly regarded as an important and necessary action to be taken.

A largely recognized issue of voting and its ability to influence change may stem from Millennials' belief that the United States is headed in the wrong direction. Phase 2 of the 2017 Millennial Impact Report found that 71 percent of Millennials agreed with the statement above, and merely a third (29 percent) believe the U.S. is going in the right direction.²¹³ It is here that positive regard for voting may be on the decline. While Millennials may think voting is important, with 77 percent saying it is the duty of every

²¹⁰ Achieve. *The 2016 Millennial Impact Report Wave 2 Trends. The 2016 Millennial Impact Report*. Report. Millennial Impact Report, 2016: 28.

²¹¹ Ibid., 29.

²¹² Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 18.

²¹³ Ibid., 26.

citizen, it falls behind other actions such as signing a petition (including online), attending a protest, and attending a rally/march.²¹⁴ The perceived value of voting may be changing over time, but the Millennial Impact Report found that nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of their respondents continue to associate voting as a vital form of activism.²¹⁵ There was also a notable relationship between the respondent's educational attainment and the more likely they believe voting will lead to change.²¹⁶ Educational attainment appears to also be closely linked to Millennials who self-identify as an activist: "individuals with lower educational attainment were less likely to self-identify as an activist, and those with higher educational attainment were more likely to report themselves as activists."²¹⁷

Most engaged Millennials use social media platforms to express political opinions, but Millennials hesitate to self-identify as an "activist" – "one who actively campaigns to bring about political or social change." Four out of five respondents did not identify themselves as an activist, but for the 20 percent who did they were found to have "greater confidence in the ability of their own (71%) and of organization's abilities to create change."²¹⁸ Activism continues to be defined by more traditional parameters, including actions such as protesting. It was not until the MIR's second phase did respondents expand the definitions of all five labels to include posting on social

²¹⁴ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 18.

²¹⁵ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

²¹⁸ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*.

media.²¹⁹ However, with nearly half of Millennials identifying as supporters, it does little to negate common criticisms of Millennials being “slacktivists.”

Defining “Traditional” in Contemporary Politics

Researchers from the 2017 Millennial Impact Report said it the best:

Moreover, these high-activation Millennials are making themselves heard not just through the technologies they’re extremely comfortable with – such as social media – but by intertwining them with more traditional and recognizable forms of activism.²²⁰

Traditional forms of activism and engagement is not solely limited to voting, marching, and protesting. Technology has given citizens a megaphone, a tool to support political and social issues, that does not reduce their engagement offline. Aaron Smith from the Pew Research Center supports this finding, stating “the people who engage politically in online venues have many of the same characteristics, behavioral patterns, and attitudes toward the issues of the day as those who take part in other (offline) types of political activity.”²²¹ He goes on to say that there is no difference between “the “online” and “offline” cohorts of politically engaged Americans are in many cases the same set of individuals engaging with political issues across a range of venues or platforms.”²²²

²¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²²⁰ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 2.

²²¹ Smith, Aaron. “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age.”

²²² Ibid., 40.

Discussion

By synthesizing data from different sources, it became apparent that online and offline activism are not mutually exclusive. Millennials who chose to be politically active online are more likely to be active offline as well, as engagement often overflows from one method to the other. Because of this there is a likeliness that online engagement can, in fact, lead to an increase in offline engagement. Most Millennials may not find online engagement to produce significant change, but its accessibility is hard to deny. Voters can connect with like-minded individuals, share opinions and access relevant information, and motivate others to engage in offline activism. Rather than looking at online and offline engagement as two separate entities, they are mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, the motivation behind engaging online and offline is not vastly different. As discussed in the previous chapter, Millennials are not apathetic to the issues around them. Rather, Millennials can use their concern over these issues to engage online and offline. It is the ease and accessibility of online social media platforms that drive information exchange, but also the concept of “slacktivism.” No doubt, “slacktivism” exists in 21st century politics. However, most Millennials recognize that social media is hardly influential in creating change, which only further emphasizes the importance of voting.

This understanding, between online efforts and traditional means of engagement, is crucial. If Millennials do not understand the foundation from which change occurs, then online engagement is less effective. But, if online efforts are used as a tool to amplify discourse on a political or social issue, then it is not solely “slacktivism,”

but ingenuity. This is how Millennials can be more effective in politics. Online efforts of political engagement must be recognized as tool, rather than a “feel-good” means to an end. And this is true for those who choose to engage online, and those who find online engagement as ineffective. As stated by the researchers who know Millennials the best, “Millennials want their voices to be heard and, for now, are combining traditional forms of activism with the channels of communication they know extremely well.”²²³

²²³ Achieve. *Phase 2: The Power of Voice: A New Era of Cause Activation & Social Issue Adoption*: 37.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Millennials engage in 21st century politics. Specifically, the intentions and motivations of Millennials were examined to create a more holistic understanding of how Millennial civic identity is formed and how they choose to engage in civic matters. This holistic approach was accomplished through a step-by-step process focusing on the source of civic identity, attitudes and intentions of engagement, and methods of engagement. Results of these efforts determined that no matter how large the gap in civic literacy and the feelings Millennials have about politics, they understand the importance of engaging in politics and turning out to vote. However, the issue is translating this concern and acknowledgement of the importance of voting to increase voter turnout.

Millennials are concerned about social issues that reach far beyond personal concerns. Their skepticism, combined with the resources at their fingertips are changing the standards of political engagement. Even with the gap in civic literacy and distrust in politics, Millennials are finding ways to engage and have a positive impact in their lives. Although data was not found to completely counter the common criticisms of Millennials, there is reason to believe they are not a generation of selfish and lazy citizens. Rather, Millennials are emerging leaders with a globalized outlook that rivals current criticisms of their generation.

The most important finding in this study is that Millennials are, in fact, engaged in politics. All three of the issues discussed in this thesis identify why voter turnout among all ages remains low, but a theme has surfaced. Even with a gap in civic literacy, Millennials engage in politics despite the deteriorating levels of civic engagement across the general voter population. Though distrust in the government and political leaders is not dissipating, and apathy and alienation remains prevalent, Millennials are still concerning themselves with socio-political issues. While online engagement is criticized as an insignificant source of change, perpetuating the concept of Millennial “slacktivism”, Millennials are still voicing their opinions and using SNS as a tool, rather a “feel-good” technique of engagement. In fact, the data shows that Millennials who engage in online activism are more likely to vote and engage in other forms of civic engagement. All of these findings, which may appear to be insignificant, contribute to the understanding of Millennial engagement in politics.

The first research question, detailed in chapter one, analyzed “civic education standards and voting behavior.” Specifically, this chapter explored whether current methods of educating young people are lacking in ways which influence voter behavior in adulthood. While civics-based curricula are being reestablished in modern times, the importance in voter behavior is more relevant than ever. Civic assessments and public opinion surveys underscore just how influential civic literacy is. When testing for civic literacy, results showed graduating high school Millennials scored an average of 50 percent – an “F” in standard grading criteria. If this isn’t too alarming, civic literacy is

shown to have little improvement in college. Rather, the most effective time to educate citizens in civics is in high school where civic identity is still emerging.

This chapter also looked at current college graduates and college graduates over the age of 65. A knowledge gap of 25 percent between generations is substantial when civic academic standards have notably changed over time.²²⁴ These standards are not uniform across geographical locations, rather students in different regions report studying a number of civic-related topics. Students who reported studying at least one civics or government course, however, performed substantially higher in civics assessment than their peers. This finding stresses the importance of establishing civic standards across all geographical locations to create a baseline from which all students can build upon their civic literacy.

An important finding of this first chapter is that civic literacy is not an inherent skill. Civic literacy requires time be set aside by educational institutions, and effort to learn from everyone. If institutions do not set aside coursework to develop this skill, they are failing to provide young adults with the opportunity to bridge the gap in civic literacy. This gap is evident not only in current measures of civic knowledge, skills, and participation but across generations as well. With respect to Millennials' civic responsibility and engagement, it is not surprising to find it inferior to their other birth cohorts. This chapter offers support that civic literacy predicts a citizen's engagement in

²²⁴ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "A Crisis in Civic Education." January 2016: 5.

politics. But what it does not offer is conclusive data that shows a decline in civic education directly affects voter behavior.

As the thesis continued to explore attitudes and feelings of Millennial voters, the second chapter attempts to identify a correlation between apathy and alienation in political engagement. In this specific research, the Millennial Impact Report was used to examine the primary motivation behind apathy and alienation.²²⁵ The most important finding from this chapter indicates that a high degree of trust is the reason why Millennials choose to be politically engaged through conventional methods.

Trust is a factor that affects apathetic attitudes and alienation. If a voter feels they can trust the political system, or those leading it, they will feel encouraged to turnout. Without trust being established, Millennials may feel alienated from the process or may be apathetic and reject any attempts to be engaged. The influence of trust in politics was notable in the 2016 presidential election. The Millennial Impact Report of 2016 tracked Millennial response to “Do you believe you can make the world a better place to live,” and it saw a gradual decline in positive responses over the course of the election period. Throughout the research, Millennials strongly believed they could make a difference, but by the time of the election, this belief was held by fewer people. If the political process is causing a decrease in Millennial trust levels and their belief in their ability to influence change, then there is reason to consider the system may be alienating these voters.

²²⁵ Achieve. *The 2016 Millennial Impact Report Wave 2 Trends*.

With fewer Millennials believing in their own ability to create change or make the world a better place, voter intentions also dipped. Apathetic attitudes or displeasure in the democratic process heightened. This increase in apathy negatively correlates to Millennials' intentions to vote. Yet, Millennials who expressed a desire to vote were not supportive of either political party. Findings suggest apathy strengthens neutrality in party identity. Rather than lean toward one political ideology or another, the cleavage of party neutrality is increasing among apathetic Millennials. Political parties and candidates have done little to right this growing concern. Rather than build trust in Millennials to include them in their party ranks, political campaigns did not often place Millennials on their radar. Millennials, who are the largest voter bloc in the United States, did not receive the same focus as the rest of the voting populace. This indifference perpetuates Millennial feelings of alienation and their apathetic attitudes. Until Millennials are acknowledged as an important voice and influence in the electorate, voter turnout and engagement will not witness positive change.

In chapter three, findings show that Millennials are motivated to engage in politics. Millennial engagement varies based on whether they consider themselves to be apathetic toward the system or feel alienated from politics. Millennials motivations and intent to vote can be greatly influenced by these feelings or attitudes. Why would a Millennial, or any voter, feel compelled to turnout when their efforts are considered futile, or they do not have opportunities to engage in the system?

Chapter three opens a discussion to explore whether a shift is occurring in methods of political engagement. How does online engagement affect traditional

methods? Are Millennials lazy and only engaging in online “slacktivism,” or is a spill occurring where those who engage online are additionally engaging offline? Further, is the opinion of voting changing as Millennials shift their forum of engagement to social networking sites? The findings of this chapter suggest that while Millennials prefer “slacktivism” over traditional methods of engagement, voting is still thought to be widely influential. Additionally, it was found that unlike common criticisms, the parent generation of Millennials, Generation X, spends more time online than Millennials.

This finding was derived from The Nielsen Report, known for their work in social media usage.²²⁶ As mentioned above, it is not Millennials who spend a majority of their time online. The Nielsen Social Media Report argues against the common criticism of Millennials as they spend an average of 40 minutes less on social media than Generation X. Even so, with reference to this specific research question, Millennials are still more likely to engage online than their peers.

While “slacktivism” is prevalent among online social media users, the “feel good” intent to engage online is not Millennials’ only motivation. One of the most important findings of this chapter illustrates a relationship between those who engage online and their activity levels offline. Engagement online and engagement offline are not mutually exclusive. Those who choose to engage online can just as easily engage offline, as well, specifically through voting. Although the intent to feel good through online political

²²⁶ Casey, Sean. “The 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report.” 27.

participation holds merit, there are those who engage online because they see it as another tool for engagement, rather than a quick-fix method of selfish intent.

In chapter three, voting is still considered a necessary action to bring about change. Even with the ease political engagement through the internet, Millennials recognize the importance of voting. It is still considered a duty of U.S. citizens, regardless of the civic literacy of Millennials – they are motivated and intend to be engaged. The discrepancy between those who say they engage online and offline is not markedly different. Research suggests engagement should not be limited to only conventional “offline” methods. With Millennials’ powerful influence on politics, standard definitions and methods of engagement must transition to more accurately reflect our globalized and technologically advanced society.

The findings of these three chapters reveals Millennial engagement in politics. While the findings of each chapter discuss isolated issues, the overarching theme remains the same. The intent and motivations of Millennials to engage in politics, specifically voting, is important to understand. Each specific chapter focuses on an issue that lays the groundwork to best understand Millennials and their preferences toward engagement. In chapter one, civic education explains why Millennials may or may not understand the importance of voting. In chapter two, distrust, alienation and apathy explain other motivations for Millennials’ engagement in politics, specifically on their decision to vote or not. In chapter three, the method of engagement for Millennials shows that no matter the intent or the motivation behind engagement, the efforts of those who choose to engage must be accurately understood.

Voter turnout may be on the decline, but this is a common trend seen across all generations. The Millennial generation itself is not the selfish and lazy generation critics suggest them to be, and although “slacktivist” behavior is acknowledged, other efforts by those who choose to be engaged online and offline are real. If the data is thoroughly analyzed, Millennials are just as engaged as their peers. The difference is that in society today Millennials have more resources and tools at their disposal to engage in politics. The world of politics is changing, and it is the Millennials who are steadily forcing this change.

Recommendations

In discussing recommendations for civic education, it is important to note efforts are being made to re-introduce civics in the classroom. While civic standards are not as comprehensive as federal standards of the 1960s, scholars have begun to recognize its influence in forming civic identity. By continuing the research on this subject matter, further findings can underscore the importance of civic education on creating a strong civic identity and responsibility of a U.S. citizen.

For politicians or organizations trying to gain Millennial support, earning their trust is the most important objective. The Millennial generation exhibits signs of alienation and apathy in politics. If trust were to be earned, efforts must be made to combat these issues. For alienation, politicians and organizations must reach out to Millennials. Rather than excluding Millennials from political discourse, engaging with

them and showing interest in their opinions is important. With regards to apathetic attitudes, Millennials lack the trust in politics to believe their efforts are anything but futile. Those attempting to dissuade Millennials from apathetic attitudes must recognize that trust encourages participation. Similar to outreach efforts combating alienation, efforts must also be made to build trust between the voters and the political system.

Concerning social media and online engagement, the recommendation is merely a matter of changing definitions to encompass unconventional methods of engagement. While voting is recognized as the most significant means to create change, there are other tools that can help facilitate it. By criticizing online engagement and disregarding its potential, we are disconnecting ourselves from an inexhaustible resource. Efforts should be made to utilize this limitless resource for engagement, but voting as well.

Limitations

One limitation to this research is that of the studies and prior research articles used, most of the sample populations of Millennials were well-educated young adults. As it has been discussed in prior chapters, high education levels correlate with increased level of political engagement and voter turnout. This in turn skews the sample population of many research sources. Although many of the data sources use a large sample population of Millennials, measuring external validity becomes difficult.

Focusing research specifically on Millennials is also difficult when each source recognizes different parameters defining Millennials. As was discussed in the

introduction, although the thesis identified Millennials as being born between 1981-1997, there was little to no consensus across data sources. This discrepancy made defining Millennials difficult and may have influenced the findings within this thesis. While not of immediate concern, it is important to note that operationally defining Millennials was not a clear and simple task.

Another limitation that affected the direction of this study was the available data. While finding substantive data on Millennials was of little issue, finding one source for the entirety of this thesis was difficult. The task was then to identify multiple sources and combine their findings. This was not difficult, but it harms the reliability of the findings. The most important setback was for the first thesis chapter. Finding recorded data of state academic standards for civic education from the 1960s to the current year proved to be quite difficult. The direction of this chapter had to be revised to reflect the data that was available.

Moving Forward

As this is an exploratory attempt at better understanding the engagement of Millennials, each chapter focuses on a different perspective. There is still a lot of work to be done to examine each specific area, but there are notable opportunities to expand upon this work. In the case of civic education, data indicates the changing trends of academic civic education over time. This will help support a common understanding that civic education influences voter turnout. Through civic knowledge, skills, and participation a voter is better equipped for future civic responsibility. Future research

could focus on a comparison of academic standards in civic education and voter turnout within each respective state. If a correlation was found between a decline in civic education standards and voter turnout, an argument could be made to underscore the importance of civic education.

The relationship between apathy and alienation is still obscure. Efforts should be made to further separate apathy and alienation, and to examine how distrust may influence them. The working relationship between all three of these factors are not yet evident but would be an important contribution to the field. As of now, this identified relationship cannot stand on its own, but the potential to further develop this relationship is worth noting. Until then, the relationship between voter apathy, alienation, and distrust lacks support for individualized research.

Future research should consider whether there is a difference between the Millennial generation and prior generations in political engagement. Are Millennials truly turning out at a lower rate than past generations? The results of this thesis suggest this is not the case, but there may be variables suggesting otherwise. If there really is a substantial difference between turnout, engagement, and overall interest in politics, efforts should be made to understand why. Online engagement may not directly create change, but what if waves of change is happening through awareness rather than measurable political outcomes? Contributing to this field provides a standard from which future generations can be compared to.

While the contribution in this field may be small, it is a growing field that will no doubt effect political engagement. Derived from this research three issues remain clear. First is to recognize the growing need for a standard of civic academics in secondary schools. Second is that efforts must be made to mitigate the growing distrust in Millennials and identify methods to reduce distrust in future generations. The third finding suggest that while social media does nothing to dissuade “slacktivists,” it is still an online resource that can be used in coordination of other engagement efforts. It is with the findings of this thesis that future studies can evolve, targeting specific areas of Millennial engagement in politics.

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